

Covenant

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Covenant

by [RobotSquid](#)

Summary

Frost Giants are ugly, cruel, and malicious creatures. Thor has always known this to be true. So then how can Loki, his beloved little brother, be one of them?

(A belated birthday fic for thorkizilla.)

Notes

This is a very, very belated birthday fic for thorkizilla, finally completed about 4 months after I set out to write it. I wanted to write her a birthday fic as a way to say thanks for running such an awesome and positive blog, and she wanted some Thorki with Jotun!Loki. The prompt, which I intended to be just a little drabble, kind of blew up out of control. But hopefully it turned out good, and I hope you all enjoy it!

Once again the fic was critiqued and beta'ed by my very good friend Snazzy, whose tumblr can be found at snazziercookies.tumblr.com. This story would be an unreadable MESS without Snazzy, who is the best and most patient and awesome beta reader in the whole world <33

Chapter 1

The only reason Thor had snuck into the weapons' vault was because Loki had dared him to. They both knew that Thor never passed up a challenge, and the longer Loki kept at it and the more obnoxious he was about it, the more likely Thor was to do just about anything to get him to shut up. It was exactly this way that Loki had convinced Thor to go diving off the Bifrost just last year. If not for Heimdall, Asgard's firstborn prince might have gone tumbling off the waterfall and into the cosmos.

They'd both been grounded. Thor remembered that as quite the bonding experience.

Yet this dare had taken more than Loki's usual amount of goading for Thor to finally cave. No one was allowed into the weapons' vault, not even the two of them, without Odin present. Now that Thor was getting older, old enough even to be doing his sword practice with live steel, doing anything to displease his father even the slightest would feel like spitting on his birthright. Thor never knew how Loki got under his skin so expertly. Most people had a low tolerance for Loki's bullshit yet Thor always felt particularly susceptible to his brother's needling.

"I'm not telling you to *steal* anything," Loki had said, rolling his eyes. When it all started, they'd been sitting under the shade of a tree as Thor rested from his latest spar in the practice yard. Loki sometimes came here to watch Thor practice, or read while pretending *not* to watch Thor practice.

"Well, what *are* you telling me to do, Brother?" Thor had asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

"Just go inside. It's going to be yours one day anyway. You're not doing anything wrong."

Thor had laughed. "Even I could lie better than that, Loki. You want to get me exiled, don't you?"

"If stealing Father's horse and spraining its ankle didn't get you exiled then nothing will."

"I'm not *you*, Loki. I can't just get into trouble whenever I want anymore. I'm going to be a king someday and—"

"*Someday*," Loki had interrupted. "Not *today*."

The conversation had only gone downhill after that. And now, they were both huddled around a corner, waiting for the Einherjar patrolman to vanish further down the hall. Once he was out of sight, they darted down the corridor and hid behind another corner.

"So have you decided?" Loki whispered. "How deep shall we go?"

"Shut up, Loki," Thor hissed back. "Just a little further. If you fall behind I'm not stopping for you."

"Fair enough."

They maneuvered their way further into the vault, dodging the guards when they could, cloaking themselves with Loki's magic when they couldn't. Eventually, they were so deep inside that Loki began to feel a twinge of suspicion. Surely Thor wasn't smart enough to go along with his plan just so he could abandon Loki here and tattle on him later?

Thor slipped on a small flight of steps leading down to the lowest floor of the vault and fell clumsily, all the way to the bottom.

Loki giggled softly into his palm.

“Shut up, Loki!” Thor hissed again, scrambling to his feet. “Okay, we’re here.”

Loki looked up at the door they had arrived at. “Ah,” he said, with more than a little admiration. He recognized this room. “You go straight for the heart of it, don’t you, Brother?”

“You should know that by now.” Thor grasped the handle and pulled the heavy door open, his strength making short work of it.

Down another, shorter corridor, atop an unassuming pedestal, sat the Casket of Ancient Winters. Odin’s greatest warprize from the war with Jotunheim centuries ago.

Loki flexed his fingers nervously as Thor eagerly headed into the chamber.

“Ah...Thor,” Loki said, hastening after him. “I don’t think you’re ready to take on the Destroyer just yet.”

“The Destroyer is for intruders,” Thor assured him. “We’re not intruders.”

Loki grit his teeth and sighed heavily. He crossed his arms and watched his brother circle the glowing blue artifact, Thor’s eyes shining with confidence.

“Well?” Loki snapped. “Go ahead.”

“Go ahead what?”

“Touch it at least, you idiot! Unless you want to admit you’re afraid?”

Thor laughed aloud, the sound echoing sharply throughout the room. He clapped his hands over his mouth and winced as the echo died down. “Okay,” he whispered. “If it freezes me you’ll magic me back to life, right?”

Loki scoffed. “Maybe. If I feel like it.”

Thor grinned and cracked his knuckles. He reached one hand out towards the Casket, which glowed brighter in response. Loki watched him intently, forgetting to listen for sounds of guards or even the Destroyer, Valhalla forbid it should even appear. What *would* happen when Thor touched the Casket? Maybe it would freeze him solid. Maybe it might kill him, or turn him into a monster.

Well, it’s not like it would be Loki’s fault if anything happened to Thor. Loki hadn’t *forced* him to come down here, and the Casket certainly hadn’t been Loki’s idea. If anything happened to the beloved, idiot prince, it was Thor’s fault and Thor’s fault alone.

Thor touched two fingers to the Casket’s shimmering surface and yelped, immediately drawing back. “Ouch!” he cried. “Ugh, it *stings*!”

“Good for you,” Loki said, uncrossing his arms and turning back to the door. “I’m leaving. You can come if you like.”

“Wait, Loki!” Thor laughed. “Come back! It’s really just a little shock, it doesn’t hurt that bad.” He touched it again and giggled. “It kinda tickles if you do it quickly.”

“You made your point!” Loki insisted. “If the guards see you *I’m* going to be the one who’s in trouble.”

Thor frowned, and then a cheeky smile spread across his face. “Oh, now *you’re* scared?”

Loki scoffed. “Excuse me?”

“Come on, Brother, *I* touched it. Now it’s your turn.”

“That wasn’t the deal.”

“What *deal*?” Thor laughed again. “You’re such a baby, Loki. Even Sif would do it if she were here.”

Loki’s face flushed. “I’m sure Sif would put her fingers anywhere if it got you to pay attention to her,” he hissed.

The smile fell off Thor’s face immediately. “Take it back,” he demanded, taking a step towards Loki.

“Oh, what?” Loki snickered, shrugging theatrically. “As a matter of fact, I think I saw her putting her fingers somewhere intimate with one of the servant boys yesterday.”

“Shut up, Loki!” Thor shouted, grabbing his brother by the front of his shirt. Loki was used to getting into physical fights with his brother, but it had been quite a while, and he was startled by how easily Thor was able to throttle him.

Nevertheless, Loki went on. “She’ll do it with anyone who asks. She even gave *me* a look the other day—”

Thor’s fist clipped Loki in the jaw hard enough to knock him to the ground. The back of Loki’s head struck the floor, dizzying him for a second. He could feel his skull vibrating with the force of the blow.

“Why do I ever listen to you!?” Thor shouted. “You’re cruel and ugly and all you ever do is try to *ruin everything* I care about!”

Loki laughed and turned over on his side, spitting blood-tinged saliva on the base of the pedestal. He sat up and rubbed his jaw, looking up in time to see Thor walking away.

“It was a joke!” Loki laughed. “Just a bit of fun! I didn’t know you cared that much about her, Brother.”

Thor did not respond, nor did he break his gait as he headed for the door.

The smile fell off Loki’s face and he rubbed his jaw harder, knowing there would be a bruise come morning. He pulled his hand away and saw a bit of blood had run out onto his palm. Loki grit his teeth, inciting fresh pain, and closed his fist tight around the blood stain.

“Fine!” he shouted after Thor. “You think I’m a coward, then? Watch me!”

That got Thor’s attention; he stopped walking and cautiously looked back. “Loki, stop it,” he said, all humor gone from his voice. “Let’s just go.”

“No! Watch me!” Loki demanded again. He stood behind the Casket’s pedestal and slapped his bloodied palm onto the glimmering cobalt rock. He braced himself for a shock, hoping it would hurt worse than what Thor had endured, but the shock never came. If anything, it was pleasantly cool, smooth and solid like the clearest, freshest ice.

Loki was silent for an instant, and then laughed uproariously. “Now I’m the coward, am I?” he teased. “You could barely touch it. Look at me, Brother, I don’t feel a thing!”

Thor stood at the end of the room, eyes wide, mouth hanging open.

Loki grinned smugly as his brother approached him again. Thor’s face was going pale, and he kept blinking over and over. Loki scoffed.

“You don’t have to be so dram—” Loki glanced down at his hand and felt his breath catch in his throat.

“Loki, you’re...” Thor murmured, pointing at his face, “...turning blue.”

Loki pulled his hand away from the Casket and furiously rubbed his palms together.

“What did you do!?” he shouted, staring at the raised patterned lines that were beginning to form on the backs of his hands and up his arms. “This didn’t happen to you!”

“I didn’t do anything!” Thor replied frantically. He reached out with both hands to grab Loki’s arms, but he drew back.

“*Don’t touch me!*” Loki screamed. “What’s happening, Thor, what is this!?”

“Calm down!” Thor kept his hands out in front of him, though Loki kept drawing back from his touch. “Calm down, we’ll go tell Father, he’ll know—”

“*No*,” Loki shouted. “No, don’t tell Father, he’ll know this was my fault, he’ll know it was me!”

“Okay, okay! We won’t tell Father, we’ll go get Mother. Loki, calm down, it’s fine....”

“It’s not fine! I’m cursed now, I’m going to die!”

“You’re not going to die, Loki.” Thor’s voice was steady, growing calmer as Loki grew more and more frantic. His eyes were fixated on his brother, yet he kept his distance. “It’s just...you look like....”

Their eyes met, and at once, they realized.

“A Frost Giant,” Loki breathed out, his voice shaking lightly. “The Casket turned me...into a Frost Giant?”

“I don’t know,” Thor assured him hastily. “It didn’t do anything to me, so I don’t know—”

Loki heard the distant voices of guards coming down the upper hallway just before he fell to the floor and his vision faded.

Somehow, they got out of it without being grounded or even otherwise punished.

Just before the guards arrived, Thor had thrown his cloak over Loki’s unconscious body and demanded that the guards fetch Frigga at once. He’d kept Loki and his sudden deformity hidden from all prying eyes as he carried his little brother up from the vault and into the healing rooms. Thor knew it looked bad; he could only assume that the Einherjar would see what he saw. Thor would *not* have anybody spreading rumors about his little brother. When Frigga arrived and saw what had happened, she had told Thor to leave and to send for his father.

Now, after skipping lunch, dinner, and all his other duties to pace anxiously outside the healing room door, Thor was allowed to come back inside.

There wasn't much of a conversation before it all dissolved. All Thor understood was that Loki was yelling, and then Odin was yelling, and Thor was not being heard so he had to yell too.

"It *doesn't matter* who told whom to go down into the vault!" Odin shouted, his voice rattling the walls. "The both of you ought to have enough sense between you!"

"Why didn't it change Thor!?" Loki demanded, his skin returned to its usual, pale hue. He jabbed an accusatory finger at his older brother. "*He* touched it first! Why didn't it change him!?"

"I didn't put my whole hand on it, Loki!" Thor protested.

"You probably knew, didn't you?" Loki sneered. Loki's eyes were glistening, in just that way Thor recognized and knew meant that he was struggling not to cry. "You knew that would happen, that's why you barely touched it at all. You just wanted to embarrass me, *again*, and act like you're smarter than me when you're really just a coward and a liar."

Thor bristled and took a step forward with his fist raised. "Do you want a black eye too!?"

"*Enough!*" Odin yelled, stepping between his sons and forcing them apart. "I've told you often enough not to strike your brother, haven't I!?"

Thor lowered his arm and had the grace to look ashamed.

"All three of you would do well to lower your voices," Frigga remarked, side-eyeing her husband. "The two of you will not go to the vault again. Although clearly if you managed to make it as far as you did, we may need to tighten the security down below. Wouldn't you agree, All-Father?"

"Of course," Odin grumbled. "And if I catch either one of you near there again you'll wish the Destroyer had gotten you first."

"But what about—" Loki insisted, only to be viciously cut off.

"We're done here!" the All-Father shouted. It was the tone that even Loki did not talk back to, and his son quickly silenced himself.

"Odin..." Frigga beseeched him gently, but he would not hear it.

"Both of you, out of my sight," he said.

Thor's head was spinning, like none of it was truly happening. This whole day must be a dream. How could Odin not explain what had happened? "Is Loki—"

"Go," Odin repeated. "It is the last time I will tell you."

When Thor followed Loki out, he felt numb. He had at least expected an explanation. The distinct lack of one meant something else entirely. It frightened him, and though Thor was no stranger to fear, he at least always knew *what* he was afraid of.

Loki was saying nothing. Thor blindly and mechanically followed him down the hall to the room they shared. Preparations were being made to move Thor into another, bigger room within the year, but for now they still shared the same chambers.

Thor knew that Loki's silence was ten times more dangerous than his tantrums. Sometimes Thor

could swear he saw the rage sparking out from his brother's eyes and fingertips and mouth. He knew that in those moments Loki would destroy everything around him, himself included, if just to let the storm loose.

Thor remembered a day in which Loki had been denied permission to go on a hunting trip with him and their father. And he remembered coming home to find cracks in the palace walls where Loki had blasted it with magic. It was the one time Thor had heard his parents fight, as Odin had regretted allowing Frigga to teach Loki any magic at all if he could not be a man about it.

Once back in their room, Loki went straight to his bookshelf and grabbed a well-worn tome. He plopped down on his bed and began to flip through the pages.

"Loki..." Thor had no clue what to say. He knew as much as Loki did about the whole thing. But he had to say *something*...cruel and mean and teasing as Loki may be, he was still Thor's little brother. The one that Thor had sworn to always protect and love since the first day Loki had smiled at him.

"I'm not stupid," Loki muttered softly, keeping his eyes fixated on the bright moving pictures. "They think I'm stupid but I'm not."

Loki stopped turning the pages and Thor finally recognized the book. It was one of the first books Frigga had ever read to them as children, a book of fairytales, legends, and history. It was laid open to the tale of Jotunheim, where a fierce, enormous Frost Giant was spread out across the page.

"Loki," Thor said again. "I don't know what the Casket did to you, but you're not a Frost Giant. You can't be. You're my brother." It made no sense otherwise. Had he not seen Loki as a baby, swaddled up in cloth in his mother's arms? Hadn't Frigga told him, "This is your brother, my love"? Loki had *always* been here. Any other story was just a lie.

The page ripped and crumpled as Loki closed his fist over the picture, tearing it out and slamming the book shut.

He threw the book at a mirror hung on the opposite wall, which shattered into countless sparkling pieces of glass all over the room.

Thor did not see Loki outside of meals and lessons for nearly a week. He was used to his brother's moods—in fact he and Fandral frequently made a joke of keeping track of Loki's monthly cycles—but this time, knowing the cause, it caused him nothing but anxiety.

When Loki did not come to dinner one night, and when Thor saw the intensely furrowed brow of his mother, he knew that something had gone wrong. He resisted the urge to ask her any questions about Loki the entire meal, largely because Odin was in a wretched mood for some reason or other, and Frigga herself just looked exhausted. As soon as the meal ended, he excused himself and went to where he knew he'd find Loki.

Besides reading and practicing his magic, Loki's favorite pastime was to be with the horses. Thor had caught him reading *and* practicing his magic in the stables many a time before, and it was no surprise to find him there now. He was brushing down one of the mares at the far end of the stable, at the end of a line of noticeably well-groomed other mares.

Loki turned at the sound of footsteps, and immediately scoffed. "Get out of here," he spat, turning back to the mare and brushing her with a firmer hand. "You're upsetting the horses."

“Did you talk to Father today?” Thor took a cautious step forward, as if Loki would be the one to kick back and knock out his teeth at the first sign of trouble.

“And what do you suppose he would have to say to me?”

“Okay...did you talk to Mother then?”

“I talked to a lot of people, Thor. Is there something you want to ask me or are you just making a list of all my conversation partners?”

Thor reached out and grabbed Loki’s wrist, halting his harsh, irregular brushstrokes. “You know what I’m talking about,” he insisted. “What’s going on, Loki?”

Loki yanked his hand out of Thor’s grip and threw the brush at his feet. “I don’t have to tell you *anything*,” he hissed, his eyes growing dark and cold.

“Is it about the vault?” Thor asked, not daring to break eye contact. “Did you get some sort of punishment for that? Is that why you weren’t at dinner?”

Loki laughed. “No, you idiot.”

“Then what’s the matter with you!? You haven’t talked to me in days, I never see you.”

“Really? That must be why I’ve been in such a pleasant mood lately.”

Thor curled his hands into fists, his arms shaking with restraint. “I’m *worried* about you, all right?” he said through gritted teeth. “This *is* about the vault, isn’t it? Is there something wrong with you now? Are you sick or something, Loki? Just tell me!”

Loki laughed again, a joyless sound heavy with bitterness. A laugh that had no business coming out of Loki’s mouth. “I can’t believe how stupid you are. Sometimes I tell myself, ‘there’s no way we can be related.’ Sometimes I wish for it, because it would *just make sense*.”

“No you don’t,” Thor protested, unable to mask the hurt in his voice.

“I asked Father,” Loki continued, his gaze piercing. “I’ve been asking him every day since we went to the Casket. And he has kept ignoring me, he has kept deflecting all my questions, because he doesn’t think that I am smart enough to figure out what he’s doing. I asked Mother, and she wouldn’t say anything either. So I told her, ‘if something had happened to Thor, you wouldn’t keep it from him.’ She denied it, of course. It’s always so funny when people try to lie to *me*.”

“What are you even talking about?” Thor asked, growing more exasperated—and confused—by the minute.

“I called Mother a liar and Father walked by just as I said it and he was not pleased. No, not at all.” Loki pursed his lips and paused for a moment before continuing. “But Mother told him, she said, ‘it’s been long enough. Stop insulting him and let him know.’ So Father and I went back down to the vault, and he showed me the Casket again, and he said that it was not the only thing he took from Jotunheim.”

Thor stared blankly at him, searching his brother’s eyes for some tell, some indication that this was another game to him. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t. You wouldn’t understand even if I said it out loud, would you?”

“Then just say it!”

“I’m a Jotun, Thor! A Frost Giant! Father said so himself!”

For an instant, Thor thought Loki expected him to laugh and see through his trick, and he almost did. Instead, the only thing that came out of his mouth was: “No, you’re not. You’re my brother.”

“I’m *not* your brother!” Loki screamed, shoving Thor with all the strength he had. The telltale glimmer in his eyes was back, and this time a single tear tracked down his face. “I never was! I’ve always *been* a Frost Giant, I was *born* in Jotunheim, and Odin *stole me* just like I was some other spoil of war to him!”

“Loki, wait,” Thor said, stumbling backwards a step. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why would Father take *you*? He must be....” He couldn’t even bring himself to say “lying.” It seemed a sin to even think of the All-Father stooping to such baseness.

“He said he wanted to make *peace* with the Frost Giants.” The sound that came out of Loki’s mouth seemed like a laugh, but his face was contorted in rage and confusion. In the past, Thor had used to laugh at how easy it was to bring his little brother to tears. He wondered now how he ever could have thought the sight of Loki in pain was amusing.

“You know, it just *makes sense*, doesn’t it?” Loki asked, his voice breaking with fury. “Why *you’re* the favorite. Why Mother always loved *you* best. Everybody always calls *me* the liar but I could never come up with anything as untrue as Odin claiming to love me!”

“That’s not true,” Thor murmured weakly. In response to what, he could not say.

“Oh, it’s wonderful news for *you*, Thor,” Loki spat, shoving him again. “You’ll never have to worry about me taking anything of yours, because it’s *all* yours, and when you’re king you can have me thrown out and all of Asgard will love you for getting rid of the monster.”

“You must have misunderstood what Father said,” Thor said. As explanations went, it was weak even for him. But what else was there to say? Loki couldn’t be telling the truth, he was just lying like always. Trying to make Thor angry, like always.

“*I didn’t misunderstand!*” Loki screeched, raising a fist and preparing to throw it in Thor’s face. Thor simply caught his wrist as it came in, and then caught Loki’s other hand before he could swing it.

“You’re the one that called me ugly!!” Loki shouted, powerless against his brother’s grip. “You’re the one that always said I didn’t belong here!”

“Loki, *stop*, just calm down—” Even as the words rang true in Thor’s ears, he could not fight Loki, not now. Even as he remembered, in painful detail, every last hurtful, terrible, unbrotherly thing he had ever said to Loki in order to hurt him over the years, he held on tight. Loki sought a fight, and he would not get it; not here, and not against Thor.

“Let go of me Thor, let go of me right now!”

Thor pulled Loki towards him and wrapped his arms solidly around his brother. Despite Loki’s wriggling and squirming, Thor’s arms held him firmly in place.

“It’s okay,” Thor said, placing one hand on the back of Loki’s head to steady him. “It’s okay.”

“Don’t touch me,” Loki demanded, pushing futilely against his brother’s unyielding weight.

“You’re not ugly. I’m sorry I said that.” Loki was starting to shake in Thor’s embrace, and Thor only squeezed him harder. He could not say why. Perhaps it was so Loki could feel steady on his own two feet, despite his trembling. Thor had always been poor at words, but even then there was nothing he could say to quiet the storm that was his little brother.

“You’re my brother,” Thor repeated, the only thing he knew for an irrefutable proof. “You have always been. You are not a monster and I will never cast you out.”

Loki stopped struggling, but did not return the hug. He let his arms hang limp, pressing his forehead into Thor’s shoulder. Thor was not sure if he should say something else, or try to make Loki laugh, or just stand there, silent and powerless. He could feel Loki’s ragged breathing against his own chest. Thor wished that all of this was a dream, that he would wake up and find they had never gone to the vault at all.

After a long silence, Loki sniffled loudly and said, “Everybody will find out. What if they all want to kill me?”

“I won’t let them.” Thor did not even have to think about his answer. Loki was his brother, and Thor *knew* that, and he would not let a single person harm him.

He heard Loki snuffle and laugh brokenly, and then felt Loki’s arms finally return the embrace.

Chapter 2

Nobody in Asgard found out. The secret stayed within the family, but Thor feared it had torn a rift between Loki and their father. Thor could not imagine that he himself would have reacted to the news of being adopted any better, but then Loki had always accused Odin of favoritism. Thor was afraid that Loki would eventually find no reason to care anymore: about his duties as prince, about Asgard, about Thor. But if anything, Loki only buried himself in his magic even more. There were days when Thor did not see Loki or their mother at all, the two of them locked deep in a library somewhere and exchanging knowledge that only they could understand.

For Thor, things changed and changed quickly. He'd been getting older, as had Loki—Thor even had the beginning scruff of a beard on his face. Odin was prepping him in earnest to be crowned heir. He had more weapons practice, more lessons, and he'd even sat in on a few of Odin's council meetings. Even if Loki had time for him, Thor no longer had time for Loki. He moved out of their shared chambers into a much bigger one in a different hallway. One fit for the crown prince of Asgard. He had been honestly ecstatic for days that he could leave his things wherever he wanted and not have to deal with Loki's tantrums.

Eventually, the silence became louder than Loki had ever been.

On sleepless nights there was no longer anybody to talk and joke with, to whisper at across the room and complain about the nursemaid turning off their lights too early. Thor would have given anything to be able to see Loki across the room just like how it used to be.

It had been six years since the incident in the vault by now. Since then, nobody had ever talked about it. Thor did not have the courage to ask his father any more questions, nor was he going to dare broaching that subject with Loki. The one time Thor had thought to ask Frigga, it had been in the midst of a particular brutal argument with his brother—over something minor, he was sure—and in the end Thor had felt like such a question would be cruel.

Sometimes it felt like the whole thing had never happened. He barely even remembered what Loki had looked like during those few seconds where his appearance had fallen away. Some days, Thor felt like Loki had lied, made the whole thing up, because he had never gotten a true answer and figured what was the harm in lying to himself about it? But the look in his brother's eyes had changed since that day. It was a change Thor had never been able to ignore.

He rolled over on his side and stared out the window. The new room was full of them. Windows and balconies, all so he could see what would one day be his city. So he would never forget the responsibilities that would be laid upon him.

He would be King Thor Odinson. The most powerful man in the Nine Realms. He'd have to marry, and have children, and teach them and see them crowned as well.

That part he didn't mind so much. Odin and Frigga already discussed openly which women they thought most appropriate to be Thor's fiancée.

What he'd never considered before, and yet considered now...would Loki have to marry too? Would he leave Asgard of his own volition? Would he want to stay here at all?

The thought, which had come from nowhere, made Thor's heart seize up with fear. He had never imagined the palace without Loki in it before. He had never imagined his *life* without Loki in it. But Loki had grown so moody over the years, he spoke so often of other realms and Jotunheim in

particular. *Would* he leave?

Thor frowned into the darkness; he could not conceive of an Asgard without Loki. He would do anything in his power, once he became king, to encourage Loki to stay. He would give him houses, land, more titles, more power, more books, anything he could possibly want.

Thor turned back over, frustrated. He hung one arm over the edge of the mattress and felt under his bed. As children, he'd kept a box of tin soldiers here, and on nights that he and Loki both couldn't sleep, they would empty out the box on the floor and play for hours. Thor smiled fondly, remembering the many great battles that had been waged between them. Loki's favorite had been the figure with the lance and shield. Thor's favorite was the soldier wielding a hammer as big as his body.

When Loki began to learn magic he would sometimes animate the toys, to varying degrees of success. One night, a bannerman had been sent sailing out the window and down onto the darkened streets of Asgard. They'd held a funeral for him, and wondered if somebody had found him down there, and if he was still bravely marching into battle.

But there was no box of toy soldiers now, and no Loki to play with even if there had been. One day he would turn around and they would have both aged into old men, and Thor would not remember a single one of these days.

Then I will do something about it, Thor thought to himself defiantly. *Tomorrow I have no lessons. I would spend time with my brother, like we used to.*

"I...pardon?"

Thor grinned nervously as Loki stared up at him, his face contorted in pure confusion. He'd found Loki sitting beneath the shade of a tree, a book in his lap, and the green shimmers of magic on his fingertips.

"I said," Thor repeated, "would you like to do something today?"

Loki raised an eyebrow, his eyes searching Thor's face. For some reason, Thor noticed how impossibly smooth the hairs of Loki's eyebrows looked just then. Surely he didn't groom even those? Loki looked well-groomed all over, almost to the level of the palace ladies. There was not a hair out of place on his head, his skin pale and smooth, and a slight aroma of perfume hanging in the air around him. Thor's first inclination was to poke fun, but he had to admit to himself—Loki looked nice today.

"I can't," Loki replied flatly, not breaking his gaze. "I'm busy."

"Doing what?"

"*Not* spending time with you." He went back to his book.

"Come on, Brother, it's a gorgeous day!" Thor plopped on his knees on front of his brother and spread his hands over the book's pages. He only caught a glimpse of the pictures inside, but he could see several pictures of Jotnar and Jotun script on the pages. "We can take the horses and go have a picnic or something, or we can go hunting, or we could—"

Loki yanked the book out from under Thor's palms, snarling slightly. "*No*, I said. I don't want to do anything with you, now leave me alone."

“Loki—”

“Don’t you have *friends*, Thor?” Loki spat, turning away. “Go ask them to go on your asinine adventure with you, and *please*, just leave me be!”

Thor’s face fell and he felt a twinge in his chest. “I do have friends,” he murmured, shuffling around in front of Loki. “But I only have one brother.”

Loki stared at him a moment and then rolled his eyes. “Please,” he huffed. “I told you before. We’re not brothers.”

Thor’s mouth fell open slightly. “How can you still say that?”

“You know what I am.” Loki angrily flipped the page. “Surely you haven’t forgotten?”

As Loki lifted the book from his lap, Thor saw that he was reading a history of Frost Giants and Jotunheim. He grimaced inwardly—what reason could Loki have to be interested in *that* sort of thing? Regardless of his belief that he was a Frost Giant, Loki was an Asgardian *now*, and had been for his entire life. Thor pushed away the inclination to be offended.

“You’re being ridiculous,” he insisted. “Now are you coming with me or not?”

Loki looked up and glanced around theatrically. “Am—am I drunk? Did I not already tell you ‘no’?”

“Lokiiii,” Thor whined, reaching out to grab Loki’s hand. “I’ve been so busy, I never get any time to relax. If I go out with Sif and the others they’ll just want me to spar with them. I don’t want to do that, I want to do something different. Please?”

Loki yanked his hand away. He sat back against the tree trunk and crossed his arms. “What will you do for me?”

“I...what do you want?”

“A single strand of hair from each of the Norns.”

Thor blinked. “Really?” He could probably manage that, he would just need to convince Heimdall and then maybe get Sif to come with him....

“No, you idiot.” Loki sighed. “No. Not really.”

“I have it!” Thor exclaimed, perking up. “You spend the afternoon with me, and I will buy you that book you’ve been wanting.”

“Will you now? And which book is that?”

“The one about shapeshifting. The one you said Father won’t let you have. I remember you asking him about it at supper a few weeks ago.”

The irritation in Loki’s eyes died a bit. “And how will you do such a thing?”

“There is a library in town that has it. I will get it for you, and you can read it all you want, and when you’re done I’ll return it. Father will never know.”

Loki searched Thor’s face again, but the instant Thor let loose his notorious smile, Loki sighed and his shoulders slumped. “Fine,” he said. “But we go there *first*.”

With the book tucked snugly in Loki's saddlebag, the two brothers rode their horses at a leisurely pace down the riverbank. It had been ages since Thor had been able to take such a relaxing ride; all his stress and tension was simply evaporating out of him. Frigga had taken them to this river many times as children. They would play hide-and-seek for hours among the trees and rocks, and then Thor and Loki would go for a swim while Frigga set up their picnic. After eating, Frigga would work on some ledgers from the palace while her sons chased each other in the grass. Those days were among Thor's favorite memories.

"Here we are!" Thor said, bringing his horse to a stop. "Do you remember this place, Brother?"

Loki's dark eyes scanned the riverbank. "Yes, I do," he said, his expression softening.

Thor hopped off his horse and led her to the river for a drink. Loki came up beside him with his own horse, and at length, said, "Those picnics were nice."

"They were! I'm glad you remember." It didn't even feel like years had passed since their last visit here. Thor could almost believe he was a little boy again, and half-expected to hear Frigga's voice calling them from afar.

Loki rolled his eyes. "How could I not? You always stole my cake and said the ants had carried it away."

"I did?" Thor scrunched up his face, trying to recall. "I'm sure I would remember if I'd done anything like that."

"Believe me, you did." Their horses sated, Loki took them both over to a nearby tree and tied the reins to the trunk.

"That rock over there—" he said, pointing at a large boulder half in the river "—I pushed you off that. You insisted your arm was broken but Mother took one look and knew you were faking it."

Thor laughed. "That sounds more like something I'd do."

Loki chuckled a bit and then grabbed the book out of his saddlebag. He plopped down under the tree and flipped it open.

"Oh come on, Loki!" Thor whined. "I brought you all the way out here so you could *stop* reading!"

"That wasn't the agreement," Loki replied, not looking up. "You said you wanted to spend the afternoon with me. Well, here I am, *with* you. Go ahead and spend the afternoon how you wish."

Thor scowled darkly, but Loki would not meet his gaze. "Fine!" he announced. He kicked off his shoes. "Then I'm going to go fishing." Loki might not be getting the whole point of this outing, but it didn't mean Thor couldn't still take advantage of his one day off.

"With what?" Loki asked, still not looking up.

"With these." Thor opened and closed his hands. He'd seen it done enough times. Surely it wasn't hard to figure out.

An hour later, he had nothing to show for it save a great deal of frustration and completely soaked clothes. He kept *seeing* the fish, but no matter how quickly he lunged for them they always wriggled out of his grasp or darted away before he could move. Still, he kept trying, his constant

failures only spurring him onward.

“Thor!” There was a sharp whistle. He turned and saw Loki standing on the large boulder at the shore, pointing at a spot upstream.

“Go upstream a little,” Loki called over. “Look for one that’s distracted.”

“How can a fish be *distracted*?” Thor asked, squeezing water out of his hair.

“Just do it. And be quiet, don’t splash all around.”

“Fine.” Thor waded carefully several yards near where Loki had pointed. He saw a heavy concentration of fish, most of them wriggling slowly against the river’s currents. Not a single one seemed to even realize he was there. Thor grinned excitedly and looked back over towards Loki.

“Now what?” he asked quietly.

“Kneel down,” Loki explained as he sat down on the boulder, “and put your fingers underneath the tail, gently.”

“What?”

“Trust me, all right? Just sort of...touch it gently, and work your way up its belly. It calms them.”

“Very well....”

Half-believing this to be a prank, Thor bent down in the water, keeping his eyes on one fairly large fish. He dipped his hands into the water, reached up, and touched its underside. When it didn’t react, Thor continued, stroking his fingers up and down the fish’s belly, until he noticed the fish going somewhat slack.

“Now,” came Loki’s voice, “work up to the gills and grab it there.”

Thor kept at it, calmly, meticulously working his way up until he felt the gills. He slipped his fingers into them and yanked the fish up and out of the water.

“HA!” he shouted, holding it aloft. “It worked! Loki, did you see!”

“Impressive,” Loki said, smiling. “I’m surprised you could stand still for that long.”

“How did you know that would work?”

“I read about it.” Loki pushed a wayward strand of hair behind his ear and shrugged. “I couldn’t stand seeing you make an idiot of yourself out here any longer.”

“I bet I could do it again,” Thor said, setting the fish free into the river. “Watch me.”

Loki sighed and rested his chin in his palm. “Go on.”

Out of the thirty-one attempts that followed, Thor caught six more fish. Each time he succeeded, Loki would clap mockingly and say he got lucky. However, on the last fish, Thor pulled it out of the river so violently that he threw himself backwards and onto his back. Although that one got away, he hardly cared.

Because as soon as he sat up and shook the water from his hair, he heard the sound of Loki laughing. He saw his brother doubled over, genuine laughter pouring out of him like Thor hadn’t

heard in years.

Thor's heart immediately clenched in pain. He could not say why. He smiled to see Loki happy, but felt as though he could cry. Perhaps it was because this was the first time he had seen Loki laugh in years. Thor had made him laugh; Thor had made him happy. He should have been seeing to that every single day. He should never have abandoned his little brother for so long. Why had Thor waited so long to seek out some private time with him? How many years had passed since they had last done anything like this?

Thor waded out of the water and shook himself again. Loki hopped down from the boulder, wiping tears from his eyes.

"That was very good, Brother!" he said, giggling still. "A bit more practice and you can feed the whole palace."

"Maybe," Thor replied, grinning. He pulled off his soaked shirt, squeezed the excess water out, and spread it over the rock. Loki wandered back to his book beneath the tree.

Thor followed and plopped down beside him. "See? We had fun today, didn't we?"

"Oh yes," Loki answered, smiling as he turned the page. "Plenty of fun watching you fall on your ass in the river."

Thor grinned again to see the smile on Loki's face. It was a much better look than Loki's usual expression, which was either a blank look of vague discontent or a contortion of rage and spite. Loki's eyes were moving back and forth, back and forth over the words, at such a pace that Thor was certain he couldn't be actually reading them. Just before Loki reached the end of the page, he took it in between his thumb and forefinger and turned it carefully. Thor watched him flip three pages that way before he realized that he was staring at Loki's hands.

They looked soft, like a woman's hands, and Loki had even painted the nails black. Thor wondered why he hadn't noticed before, but now that he did see, he was entranced. Thor's own hands were calloused to the point where he almost never used gloves for weapons training anymore. Loki's were smooth, like their mother's, his fingers slender to where Thor could see every joint in them.

Thor had a sudden and fierce desire to grab Loki's hand, just to touch it, just to run his thumb over his brother's fingers, to commit to memory every last vein and crease of his palm. Just to feel his skin, to see if it really did feel as much like silk as it looked.

"What are you doing?"

Thor was jolted out of his reverie, looking up to see Loki staring at him. Strangely, he did not look mad; instead, there was something like fear in his green eyes. Only the slightest hint of it, the barest glimmer that only Thor could recognize.

"What? Nothing!" Thor protested. "I was just...just...admiring your...nails?"

Loki pursed his lips and a tiny blush crept up his cheeks. He averted his eyes. "Are you going to make fun?" he asked quietly, balling one hand into a fist.

"No, of course not!" Thor, without thinking, grabbed Loki's hand and ran his thumb over the black lacquer. "They're very nicely done!"

Loki immediately yanked his hand back and rubbed it defensively. "I meant to remove it earlier," he mumbled.

“Why? It looks nice!” It wasn’t untrue. Nail polish was a woman’s thing, and Thor had never understood how they ever had the patience for it. Thor wondered if Frigga had helped him with it, or what Odin might say if he ever saw.

“Please, Thor.” Loki glared bitterly. “Don’t make fun of me.”

“I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry. I just....” Thor paused, chewing at his lip, searching for something to say that would not sound forced. “I don’t get to see you that much anymore.”

Loki raised both his eyebrow briefly in mock surprise. “Isn’t that what’s expected of the firstborn? You only have a few more years before you will have your coronation. You don’t have time anymore for things like...today.” He almost sounded wistful.

“But I made time!” Thor said, perking up. “I had to twist your arm a little but you came out here with me, didn’t you?” He reached over and clapped his hand down on Loki’s left shoulder, pulling him in for a tight side-hug.

“Ew,” Loki hissed, squirming away. “You’re all wet and you smell like fish.”

“Sorry.” Thor pulled his arm back, and once again that tight sadness clenched around his heart. “Well, do you think we could try to make more time for each other?”

“How do you mean?”

“I usually get one day a month like this where I have absolutely nothing to do. We can start coming here more often. Maybe bring a picnic like we used to. Or just explore, or relax.”

Loki closed the book, running his fingertips up and down the spine nervously. “And what will people say?”

Thor frowned. “They’ll...say...that we’re having a picnic.”

“You never wanted to spend time with me before. Suddenly we’re having a date every month?”

“You’re my brother. It’s not odd, not even slightly, that we should want to spend time together.”

“Thor.” Loki dropped his voice to a whisper, his eyes cast toward the ground. “We’re *not* brothers. You know that.”

“Yes we *are*,” Thor insisted. “Why do you keep saying that today?”

“What if one day you decide that you simply don’t want to be brothers anymore?” He looked up again. “Suppose we have a fight and you can no longer stand the sight of me? You could disown me at any time, and you would be within your rights to do so.”

Thor blinked. His insides felt like they were shriveling up. “I would never do anything like that, Loki,” he said, incredulous that he had to say it at all. “Do you really think so little of me?” Loki looked away from Thor’s confused gaze. “Do you really think I’d do something like that?”

“I don’t know *what* you’ll do. You’ll be a different person once you’re king. You’ll have all sorts of duties and responsibilities to consider. Including the responsibility to protect Asgard from Jotnar.”

“Loki....”

“Once I come of age,” Loki said sharply, cutting him off, “I’m going to leave. I’m leaving Asgard

and going somewhere else.”

Loki might as well have punched him. Thor inhaled deeply, searching his brother’s face for some sign that this was a joke. “Why?” was all that Thor could muster.

“There is nothing for me here. And I don’t want to go back to Jotunheim; Father said I was a runt and they’ll probably kill me if I go back. There’s seven other realms...I’m sure one will be suitable.”

“You’re joking, right?” Thor tried to laugh. The sound was weak and pained. “You can’t leave.”

“Well, you’re not king yet so you very well can’t tell me *what* to do. If it would ease the pain, then maybe we should scrap your plan of a monthly brother-date, hmm?”

“So have you been avoiding me on purpose? Because you want to leave me?” Surely not even Loki could be so cruel.

“Don’t I always?” Loki asked, raising an eyebrow. “You may as well make your peace with it now, Brother. A Frost Giant has no place in Asgard. Much less a place in the royal family.”

“What makes you think you’re a Frost Giant anyway?” Thor demanded, his frustration winning out over his confusion. “Just because Father told you that you were?”

“You saw what happened when I touched the Casket!” Loki snapped. “Do I need to remind you?”

“If you’re a Jotun then why don’t you look like one?”

“I don’t *know* why, Thor. I assume it’s a spell Odin put on me or some other such thing. I’ve been trying to find a way to reverse it—” he ran his thumb over the exposed page edges “—but I don’t know what he did. I don’t know how to change back.”

“Well...” Thor rattled his brain, searching for some explanation. “Maybe that just means that you’re not really Jotun. Maybe you just don’t remember exactly what Father said.”

“I remember,” Loki growled. “I remember *very* well what he said to me.”

Thor averted his eyes, looking down at the grass. Why did Loki have to complicate everything? The day had been beautiful and perfect and Thor had been *happy*...until Loki mentioned the Frost Giant thing. Was it his goal to ruin everything? Did it matter to Loki *so much* about where he was born that he had forgotten his entire life in Asgard? Did it matter so much that Loki would renounce Thor as his brother?

Thor knew, from somewhere deep in the brutal honest darkness of his mind, that this was his fault. Of course Loki would latch on to the idea that he was not truly related to the rest of them. Loki had always been teased, Loki had always been small and different and unlikable. Thor had always believed every word of it to be in good fun. He thought he’d done enough to prove he didn’t mean it. He’d thought that brothers teased each other all the time, but had Loki been taking it all so deeply to heart all these years? Had Thor failed so thoroughly at being Loki’s brother?

Thor sat up on his knees and looked Loki in the face. There was no trace of Jotun features there, no indication that he was anything other than what he appeared to be. Thor knew that that was always the first mistake people made with Loki. His brother was never what he appeared to be. It was a lie Loki told so perfectly, so learnedly, and so thoroughly that even he had forgotten it to be a lie.

Loki could never, *never* lie enough to undo anything about the way Thor felt about him.

“Do you remember what I said to you?” Thor asked, reaching out and gently touching his brother’s face. “Do you remember what I said in the stables?”

Loki chuckled humorlessly, but Thor could feel him leaning into his touch. Something flashed in his eyes, too quickly gone to take root.

“You said many things. To which are you referring?”

Thor had never been as perceptive as he wished to be. Loki, in particular, had a way of cloaking his meaning in so many layers of words that Thor could never dig through it all. Yet Thor could tell, in that exact moment, that Loki remembered every second of that night. He remembered every last word Thor had said to him, and he remembered his brother’s embrace like it happened every day.

“I told you that you were my brother,” Thor said. “That is something that has always been true and will continue to be true for the rest of time. Why do you believe Father over me?”

Loki bit his lower lip and scowled slightly. “That’s not fair. Don’t you dare ask me that.”

“Then don’t you dare act like anything you ever say or do could make me stop loving you!” Thor grasped Loki’s head in between both hands, holding him steady and forcing him to look him in the eye. Forcing him to see that Thor was being truthful, forcing him to stop lying to himself for *just one second*.

“I wouldn’t have to do or say *anything*, Thor,” Loki whispered viciously. “All I’d have to do is be a Frost Giant, and then you’d hate me for the rest of your life.”

Thor opened his mouth to protest, but Loki continued, “You keep saying that I’m not a Jotun because that’s what *you* want. You don’t want to believe that your precious little brother who you claim to love so much could actually be one of the monsters you swore to kill. You always said you would destroy *every* Frost Giant one day, and—how do you expect me to feel when you say things like that?!”

“Loki...” Thor said gently, leaning in closer. Loki averted his eyes, the all-too-familiar gleam of unwanted tears beginning to show. “I would never—”

“I *know* you hate the Jotnar, Thor! Just say it! Admit it! Admit that you want to kill them all!”

Thor didn’t understand why Loki was doing this to him. Of *course* he didn’t hate Loki, because Loki was just Loki. He had nothing to do with the Frost Giants, and he wasn’t one of them, he hadn’t done the terrible things that the Frost Giants had done. How could he think that Thor found him remotely like those monsters at all?

“If you are trying to trick me into saying that I want to kill you, Loki, then it will not work,” Thor said after some silence. “Even if you are a Frost Giant, then that does not mean I want to kill you. That does not mean that I hate you. I would still love you no matter what you were, Loki.”

Loki said nothing; he only scowled.

“If you were a Fire Giant,” Thor offered, “then I would still love you. If you were a dark elf, or a dwarf, or a Vanir, I would still love you. I would still protect you as best as I could, and I would still call you brother.”

Loki still would not look him in the eye. If anything, he looked even more hurt. Thor swallowed tightly, searching his brain for what he had screwed up, what he hadn’t said, how in the world he could *fix* this....

“I’m sorry, Loki,” Thor said softly. “I...I don’t know what else to say. Do you not believe what I am saying?”

“I don’t think you even *know* what you are saying,” Loki replied with more than a little acidity. “You’re just not understanding, Thor. As if I should have expected anything better from you.”

Thor bit back the response that he wished to say. *Why do you think I do not understand!? I have said that I love you, have I not? What else can I say!?*

“You don’t know anything about Frost Giants. You don’t know anything about *me*,” Loki continued. “If it ‘doesn’t matter’ to you, as you so vehemently claim, then why will you just not accept that I am a Jotun? A Jotun that you have claimed to hate?”

“I don’t hate you, Loki,” Thor said again. He would say it over and over until Ragnarok, he didn’t care. “You will never, ever trick me into saying that I do.” He paused. “And you’re wrong. I do know something about you.”

Loki scoffed but did not look away.

“And I know something about Frost Giants too,” Thor added. “And...well, of all the Frost Giants I know personally, one hundred percent of them are amazing, and smart, and clever, and the best person I know in all the Nine Realms.”

Loki tried to roll his eyes, but halfway through the motion his expression softened, and he laughed as color rose to his cheeks. “You’re so stupid,” he giggled, reaching up to wipe his eyes.

“I know.” Thor grinned. The sight of Loki’s smile warmed his heart like nothing else. “Do you still love me?”

“What do you think?”

Thor leaned forward, gently pulling Loki’s head toward him, and placed a kiss on his forehead. He lingered there a bit longer than perhaps was appropriate, but it hardly mattered. He felt such a fierce protectiveness of his brother right at that moment; if there was any way at all to show Loki how much he loved him, how painfully he loved him, he would do it. Loki was his, every last piece of him, every smile and every joke, every scintillating spark of magic, all down to the basest and cruelest of his deceit.

He felt Loki’s soft fingers curl around his wrist, and Thor pulled away. He was not sure what he expected to see in Loki’s expression just then. He was not sure what he had hoped for.

Loki’s eyes searched Thor’s own, looking deep for any sign of significance. It reminded Thor of the way a deer would scan the trees, knowing it had heard a predator, ready to dart away the instant it knew danger was coming.

“I’m sorry,” Thor mumbled awkwardly. “I didn’t mean to...well....”

Loki shook his head. “No, it’s...it’s okay.”

Thor studied his face closely; he had no idea what Loki was thinking. Nor did he have any idea what he himself was thinking as he leaned forward to press another soft kiss to Loki’s forehead. Loki leaned into it, his fingers gently squeezing and unsqueezing Thor’s wrist. Thor pulled away again, feeling as though he did not control his own movements in that moment. Yet he craved more, and kissed his brother again, this time on the temple. He could smell Loki’s hair this close, the thin scent of perfume hanging in its strands, and it was intoxicating. Loki did not wear so much

that it overpowered Thor's senses, and he was glad for it, for underneath that floral aroma was the familiar scent that was wholly, purely Loki.

He placed another kiss, this time on Loki's cheek, his skin so impossibly, smoothly soft. Thor had kissed his brother many times before, as brothers were wont to do, but it was like he had never truly *felt* Loki before this moment. His skin was perfect, *Loki* was perfect, and Thor's lips belonged here.

More and more kisses he gave, over and over, thanking the Norns for allowing him to shower his Loki with such affection as he truly deserved. Thor was almost lost in the ecstasy of this intimacy, and after he had pressed a kiss to the very, very corner of Loki's lips, he found himself hovering over Loki's slightly parted mouth, an instant away from the irreparable.

Thor pulled away, his movement sharp and sudden. What had he been thinking? What had he been *doing*?

The reality of what he had just done was not lost on him. Thinking back to an instant ago, it felt like a lifetime had passed, and the universe was a different place than it was before. Why had he kissed Loki like that? Moreover, why had he *liked* it? Why hadn't Loki stopped him? Surely he knew as well that brothers did not—*could* not—do such things. Was this another of Loki's tricks?

Loki's smile was so faint as to be unperceivable, but he was not meeting Thor's eyes. Perhaps there was a twinge of shame in his heart as well. Loki's mouth knew how to tell lies well enough, though it was a skill his face had never picked up on. Thor knew, just from seeing his brother's expression, that Loki had not stopped him simply because he had enjoyed it too.

Thor would remember that moment, of all moments, as the time he realized his brother was beautiful. And that he loved him, far, far deeper than he had even realized.

It was frightening, so frightening that Thor trembled to imagine what could possibly happen after this day.

"Will you make me a promise, Brother?" Thor asked. He had to say something, anything at all, to chase away the terror of what he'd just discovered. "Just for a short time."

Loki raised his eyebrows. "What is it?"

"From today until I am crowned, you will come with me to this river once a month. On the day when I have no other responsibilities. And...if you still want to leave Asgard after my coronation, then you may. Grant me that, and I will not stop you."

Loki shut his eyes tight and sighed. "I will not agree to that." He paused. "I can't agree to that."

"Why not?" Thor did not believe him for a second.

"You really think this is the best course of action? Your coronation is closer than you think. Once you become king, none of this will matter. Spending these days with me now will not matter. You *will not have time for me* once you are king."

"I'd rather take that chance than not see you while I still can."

Loki swallowed tightly. "If I do this, then you will not ask anything of me ever again."

Thor immediately perked up. "So you'll do it?"

“Yes. But no favors. Ever. I will not even pass you a pitcher of water if you ask me.”

Thor lunged forward and hugged Loki as tightly as possible, knocking his brother over and sending them both sprawling into the grass.

“*Thor!*” Loki screeched indignantly. “My book—!”

“Thank you, Loki, thank you!”

Chapter 3

Somewhat to Thor's surprise, Loki made good on his promise the next month, and the two following months as well. On their second trip to the river, Thor had packed fishing rods so they could fish properly this time. Loki had ended up catching more fish, but Thor's were bigger. They had cooked them—or rather, Thor had cooked them while Loki sat nearby and read—had lunch, and then Loki spent the rest of the afternoon going through his new book while Thor took a nap. Afterwards, they had headed home.

The third month, Loki had showed up with one of Frigga's telescopes, suggesting that if Thor had the patience, they could stay until nightfall and look for constellations. They'd spent the entire night looking at distant worlds and suns. Thor remembered more than a handful of the constellations he'd learned as a child, but Loki knew them all, it seemed. He had a way of explaining to Thor what he was supposed to be looking for that made it so much simpler and so much more enjoyable than Thor was expecting. Even as the sunrise crept over the horizon and long past when Loki had fallen asleep, Thor stayed awake, watching the stars fade from view. Thor did not wake Loki until after he realized he had been staring at his brother's sleeping face.

The fourth month, they had decided to take their horses further up the riverbank than usual, exploring the surrounding forest. About an hour into it, a storm broke out, forcing them to take cover in a nearby cave. By the time they had found it, they were both soaked through, and their horses were no better. Loki conjured a small fire to warm themselves by, and then they had been stuck there, just the two of them, watching the rain come down and waiting. Even after the rain had eventually let up, they continued to sit there, just talking. Thor told Loki about some of the new combat techniques he'd learned, demonstrating where he could. Loki told Thor about the magic Frigga was teaching him, and what he'd read of the nearby realms, and places that he knew Thor would love to visit.

Each time their day came around, Loki was less and less reluctant to go. And each time, he enjoyed himself, and laughed and smiled like he never did at home. Thor was positively squirming with anticipation as the day approached each month, his mind constantly bursting with ideas for what they could do next time. He found it difficult to sleep the night before, and tried to think of ways to thank Loki for doing this with him. If Loki was as happy as he appeared to be when they were together—if he was anywhere *near* as happy as Thor was—then Thor wished he could do something to make Loki smile more than just once a month. But when they were at home, in the palace, Loki seemed unreceptive to even a wave from Thor in the hallway.

Thor suspected that he knew why. Ever since that first trip, they had never spoken of the kiss, or what had wordlessly transpired between them. Even now, Thor thought that he had imagined it. The sense that Loki had known what Thor was thinking just then, or the look in Loki's eyes that suggested he had been thinking the same.

Perhaps it was for the best that it remain forgotten. Thor could not see that path leading anywhere beneficial for either of them. It had taken this much to coax Loki back into his life; he simply could not afford to scare his brother away. He would not be able to bear it if he did.

And so, he kept his desires hidden and buried away deep, deep inside. Thor would have to think of his kingly duties, his responsibility to the realm, and his parents' expectation that he would soon marry. He could not think of how Loki's skin had felt under his lips, or the fresh scent of his hair, or his piercing green eyes that said so much and revealed so little.

Nevertheless, it was not dishonorable to maintain a certain closeness with his brother. On their

second trip, after their lunch, Thor had laid his head in Loki's lap and asked him to read to him. After his usual required amount of grumbling, Loki had complied. Thor was growing greatly accustomed to hearing Loki speak. Growing up, Loki had always either been silent or loud—no middle ground whatsoever. As he'd gotten older, his voice had changed, and it was pleasant. Loki spoke so meticulously, each of his words perfectly pronounced, and all his sentences with a melodic quality to them. Thor believed Loki could have said anything and he would be enthralled. He thought of telling him so, but he was sure Loki would have found some way to take it as an insult.

On the night with the telescope, Thor had been entranced by watching Loki sleep. It was so odd and yet so calming to see his brother at peace that way. Loki was quiet, his chest rising and falling in perfect rhythm, and he didn't even snore. His hands twitched a bit in his sleep, but otherwise he was impossibly still. Thor still could not place what emotion it was that ran through him to see his brother sleeping calmly, he only knew that he fiercely wanted to keep Loki safe forever.

On the day that they had been stuck in the cave, Thor felt like something old had been made new again. He and Loki had always been together when they were children, at least up until the incident in the vaults. They had shared a room, shared lessons, even shared some clothes. They'd talked about everything back then. It hadn't been that way for so long, but being with Loki in the cave and just *talking* like brothers always did, it all just felt right. Like everything was finally clicking back into place.

None of it was wrong. Surely it couldn't be disgraceful for Thor to admit to loving his brother as much as he did? It couldn't be bad in any way to say that his love for his brother was deepening. Certainly Thor still fulfilled his fraternal duty to protect Loki, surely he did all of this out of the simple desire to give Loki everything he deserved?

Despite it all, Thor had never been as skilled at self-deception as Loki. He knew what his true feelings were quite well. Just stuffing them down did not erase them, or erase his knowledge of what he honestly felt. But he knew that he could not have them. As the prince of Asgard and its future king, he could not dwell on feelings for his brother that were anything past familial.

He *could* not, but he wanted to. If he was brutally honest with himself, if he ignored everything that he knew was right, Thor wanted Loki to be with him always. Thor had no idea what to do about it, and so he just contented himself with the fact that for now, Loki *was* with him, and he should savor what he had while it was still suitable.

Thor woke up the morning of their next excursion with a light heart. He leapt out of bed and dressed himself hurriedly, and even stopped to run a brush through his hair a few times at the mirror. He headed down to breakfast, bursting with ideas for the day. The sun was shining and the weather was even warmer. He hoped Loki would be ready to leave as soon as possible.

He arrived at the dining hall just before Odin and Frigga. Loki was a bit late, as per the norm.

"Hey Loki," Thor said once everyone had been served their tea, "I thought maybe today we should go swimming, since it's so hot out."

Loki nodded. "That sounds nice, I suppose."

Frigga looked up from her cup and set it down hastily. "Hmm? Oh no, dear. Today you have a guest."

Thor felt his heart clench and sink into his stomach. Surely he hadn't heard correctly. Frigga knew about their trips. She knew how important it was to him. Was she mistaken? "What do you mean? Today's my day with Loki," Thor insisted.

"There will be some ladies coming by the palace later this afternoon. You're going to meet with them, since one of them is going to be your future bride."

"What—*today*?" Thor protested. "Mother!"

"Calm down, son," Odin grumbled from his end of the table. "They're all pretty enough, we saw to that."

"I'm sure they are, but I already had plans. Loki and I did!" This wasn't happening. This *was not* happening.

"We're not canceling," Frigga said, her tone definitive.

"Thor, it's all right," Loki said, just before taking a bite of toast.

"It's *not* all right, Loki!" Thor turned angrily back to his parents. "You two should have asked me first!"

Even with one eye, Odin's glare was piercing. "Take care how you speak to your mother, Thor."

"Thor," Loki said again. "I don't care. It's fine. We'll go next month."

Thor clenched his hands into fists underneath the table and grit his teeth. He felt a rush of shame at the very real prospect that he could burst into tears at any moment. Instead, he grabbed his silverware and made quick work of his meal.

"Mother, Father," Loki said quietly, "may I be excused?" Without waiting for an answer, Loki pushed his chair away from the table, stood up and slinked out of the room.

Thor watched him go, his heart twisting up so badly it physically ached. He wanted to yell, to throw something, to throw a tantrum so spectacular Loki himself would be taking notes. But the urge died as quickly as it came. As much as he hated it, Thor knew better than to disobey both his parents at once.

"Hmm," Frigga mused quietly, glancing out the window. "Seems the weather's taken a bit of a turn."

Thor had always known that the day would come for him to choose a bride and marry. He had never worried over it; part of him had even been excited. But now it was a struggle to put on a genuine smile for the three girls that his mother introduced him to. It wasn't their fault, after all, that he was missing out on his day with Loki. He tried earnestly to remain cordial, but he was itching to leave, suddenly uncomfortable with this entire prospect.

Two of his suitors were Vanir and the other was Aesir. They were all pretty, in their own way, Thor supposed. But none of them had dark hair. None of them had green eyes, or smooth, pale skin. Thor studied each of their faces and tried to imagine kissing them. He didn't even have the slightest desire for a single one.

The girls' mothers had come with them as well; while they and Frigga discussed the best match,

Thor was left to converse with his three suitors alone. They appeared to all know each other, and spent their time talking to one another instead of him once it became obvious that Thor was not in a talking mood. He *wished* he could be more pleasurable company. He wished that he wasn't squirming inside, and he wished hardest of all to stop thinking about Loki.

The whole morning passed in complete misery. Thor groaned inwardly as he saw the sun go higher and higher into the sky; even if he and Loki were able to leave by noon, they would not get nearly enough time at the river before they would have to head home. Thor swallowed down his frustration and growing desire to summon Mjolnir and smash everything in sight. He wanted this affair *over*. He just *did not care*.

Eventually, his wish came true, and the meeting was finally over. Thor bid the girls and their mothers a proper farewell. Once he and Frigga were alone in the parlor, his mother asked, "Well? What did you think?"

"I don't like any of them," he announced sullenly.

"That is common," Frigga replied, shrugging slightly. "Do you think I threw myself at your father the first time I met him?"

Thor stifled a laugh. "No. I suppose not."

"I know you are upset about me springing this on you at the last moment, and I am truly sorry. I tried to have it arranged differently, but by the time it was sorted, it was too late to negotiate any changes."

Thor shrugged. "I just don't understand why any of this matters *now*. I'm not even crowned."

"The sooner, the better, my son." Frigga looked to the window. "Perhaps if you and Loki leave now you can make the most of the rest of the day."

"Maybe." Thor got to his feet and walked over to kiss his mother on the cheek. Frigga grabbed his hand and squeezed gently before he could pull away.

"It will be all right, Thor," she assured him.

Thor sought Loki where he had found him on the day of their first trip, beneath the tree in the gardens. He wasn't there. He looked for him in the library, and he was not there either. Nor was he in any of his favorite hiding spots in the open corridor windows, and none of the servants had seen him either. As unlikely as it seemed, Thor went to seek Loki in his bedroom.

A soft knock at the door finally yielded success. Thor heard Loki's mumbled, "Come in" from past the door, and his heart leapt. Perhaps the day could be salvaged after all.

He poked his head in and saw Loki lying on his bed, his back to the door. Thor stepped inside and walked over to sit on the edge of the mattress.

"Loki," he said, putting his hand on his brother's side, shaking him lightly. "Come on, I'm all done. We've got most of the day left."

Loki breathed in deep and sighed. "I just laid down for a nap."

"Come on, Loki, please?" Thor begged, shaking him harder, eliciting more grumbles. "I'm really

sorry. The morning's gone, but we have the whole afternoon left. Let me make it up to you."

"It's too late to leave now," Loki murmured, curling up tighter in his sheets.

Thor frowned, staring out the window at the beautiful sunny day outside. He sighed. Well, there would always be more sunny days.

He kicked off his boots, plopping them on the floor, and wriggled under the sheets with Loki. His brother groaned as the mattress sank deeper with Thor's added weight.

"What are you doing?" Loki sighed, looking over his shoulder blearily.

Thor snuggled up behind him and wrapped his arm over Loki's shoulder, his hand hanging over just above Loki's chest. If he were to move his palm just a few inches closer, he would be able to feel Loki's heartbeat. "I could use a nap too."

Loki sighed again and let his head drop forward. "Whatever. Just try not to kick me."

Thor grinned and nestled in closer until his face was buried just behind Loki's left shoulder. He breathed in deep, reveling in the scent of his brother. Loki wasn't wearing any perfume today, allowing Thor to appreciate his natural musk. It wasn't pleasant or unpleasant, it was just Loki.

There was nothing wrong with lying next to Loki this way, he told himself. They used to take naps all the time when they were young. Thor was not touching him in any way that was dishonorable. He was simply lying there...it was good. Yes, it was perfectly all right.

Loki was quickly relaxing in his arms, his breaths becoming slower and more even as he drifted off to sleep. All of Thor's stress and frustration from that morning melted away. He didn't even care anymore that they weren't at the river today. This was almost better. Thor didn't have to worry about what to do today, or when to head back, or how long they would have. He could just lay here, next to his brother, and worry about nothing at all.

He wondered what it would be like to wake up like this. To know that no matter how old they got or how much things changed, this would always be the same.

An idea sprouted in his mind, and Thor instantly crushed it down. What a ridiculous thought, there was no way that anybody, *anybody* would ever agree to it.

But if...what *if*....

Thor swallowed hard. Before he could convince himself otherwise, he lifted himself up on his elbow and allowed himself to kiss Loki's cheek. Just a tiny little peck. He did not even intend for Loki to feel it, yet Loki squirmed a bit in his sleep before relaxing again. He mumbled something that Thor did not understand.

"Sorry," Thor whispered, his heart sinking. Eventually he let himself drift off to sleep without wondering if the door was locked, without a care of what might happen if anybody walked in on them like this.

They had ended up sleeping most of the day away. After dinner, they were nowhere near tired enough for bed. Instead, Thor went back to his room and dug out the old box of tin soldiers. When Loki saw it, the smile on his face then was radiant. They found a secluded parlor somewhere in the palace and played for hours like they used to, laughing about the silly storylines they had made up

years ago, remembering the soldier that fell from the window; Loki even cast magic on the toys again, just like he had before.

Perhaps it was childish to spend so long playing with such old toys, but it didn't matter, not really. This was better than anything they could have done at the river. The day hadn't turned out so bad in the end. And Loki was smiling again—it seemed that Thor was forgiven.

As soon as the sky began to lighten outside, Loki stood up and announced that he'd better be off to his room.

"All right," Thor said, gathering the soldiers up and setting them back in the box. "Thanks for letting me make it up to you."

"Ah yes," Loki replied. "Playing with toys. What a wonderful date." He rolled his eyes but could not keep the grin from his face.

"Oh come on, you loved it." Thor got to his feet and set the box aside.

"All right, I did. But there was nothing you needed to 'make up' to me. I'm not mad. These sorts of things happen." Loki went to the parlor door and set his hand on the doorknob.

Impulse surged through Thor; for some reason he could not explain, he was gripped with a fear that he would not see Loki again if he left now. It was a ridiculous notion, based in nothing at all, yet.... He swiftly closed the distance between himself and his brother and grasped Loki's slender wrist. A small jolt went through Loki's body as he turned towards Thor, his green eyes wide and unreadable.

"...Yes?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Thor wasn't sure exactly why he felt so afraid at this moment. Perhaps it was his meeting earlier in the day with his potential wives, or the looming reality that one day, he really *wouldn't* have time for Loki anymore, and their brotherhood would fall to pieces in his hands. Seeing those girls today, and knowing, just *knowing*, that he could not live the rest of his life with one of them, was sending his heart into turmoil. He had hoped that one of them would catch his fancy, and he could redirect his sinful desire for Loki into a worthy love for a future wife, but if anything his yearning for his brother had intensified after today.

Slowly, carefully, he released his hold on Loki's wrist. Even though he feared that Loki would run now, slip out the door and never be seen again. Yet his brother did no such thing; instead, he turned around, his back against the door, his face bare inches from Thor's.

This is wrong. You cannot do this. You cannot. Thor swallowed hard. Oh, but he wanted it so badly. Loki was here, he was *right here*, was it possible that he wanted it too? For months Thor had tried to ignore the growing feelings in him, tried to chip away at his desires, but to absolutely no avail. He knew now that it would never get better.

What if he were to just...give in?

I have to. I have to. He will leave me one day if I do not.

Thor reached up and placed one hand on the side of Loki's face. Loki's expression did not change; he continued to watch him with blank eyes. Thor could not tell if he was afraid, angry...perhaps hopeful? Usually he could tell if Loki was at least *annoyed*, but his brother's face was expertly guarded. Thor took in a nervous breath, trusting Loki to stop him if he overstepped his boundaries. Loki usually did not have trouble with that.

Thor leaned in, just a little, just to test Loki's reaction. Loki did not move, but Thor could sense how his body tensed, and the skin beneath his hand grew warmer as blood rushed to Loki's ears. As the distance between them closed, Loki's lips parted just slightly. He took in a deep breath as Thor closed his mouth over his, and sighed out blissfully into Thor's lungs.

There was just the hint of a tremble in Loki's lips, but it instantly smoothed out as Thor softly kneaded his fingers into Loki's hair. Thor lifted his other hand and pressed it against the door. There was no chance of Loki leaving now, but he couldn't help himself. Loki had threatened so often and so convincingly that one day he would not be there. Just for now, just for this minute, Thor needed to know that he would stay.

Loki's lips were soft, impossibly soft, so perfect and so supple Thor wanted to bite them, mark them, claim them for his own. He fought the urge out of a sense of decency, and the knowledge that he could not be rough, not now. Loki was not a thing to be rough with. He was something to be handled carefully, tended to and looked after, like meticulously polished silver. Thor pushed his tongue past Loki's lips gently, testing how far Loki would allow him in, and met with no resistance. Loki's mouth opened eagerly to him, a faint whine deep in his throat.

Thor felt a small tug on his shirt and realized that Loki had lifted his hands and was grabbing onto him, his fingers curled tightly in the cloth. Overcome, Thor moved closer still, pressing his hips against Loki's hips, drinking in the whimper that came up from Loki's throat and into his own mouth.

Thor opened his eyes and slowly broke away. Loki was breathing heavily, his fingers tugging tightly on Thor's shirt, his eyes downcast at the floor. For an instant a pang of fear shot through Thor's chest—had he done it? Had he done what no person in all the Nine Realms could erase?

"Are you okay?" he asked, brushing the shell of Loki's ear with his thumb.

Loki took in a deep, shaking breath, not lifting his eyes, and nodded. "Yes...yes."

"I'm sorry," Thor said, sick with shame. "I should have asked." Heavens, he had really done it now, hadn't he? All that work, all those days he'd spent rebuilding his brotherhood with Loki, all gone for an instant of poor judgment.

"No, no, it's okay!" Loki replied quickly, looking up and tugging on Thor's shirt even harder. "I wanted it. I liked it."

"Don't feel like you must say such a thing to spare me dishonor."

"I mean it, Brother." He scowled. "Did it *appear* as if I did not enjoy it? Believe me, I would not suffer anything that I did not truly wish to."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, dammit."

Thor studied Loki's face for a good long while. He could not find the faintest inkling of a lie in his brother's expression. Was this it? Could his impossible, sinful dream be coming true? He grabbed Loki up in a hug, lifting him off the floor and squeezing him tight.

Loki cried out and yelled, "Put me *down*, you idiot, what are you *doing*—!"

"I'm just...I'm sorry, I'm just so relieved!" Thor said, gripping his brother tight like he would never let go. "I thought you would be angry. I thought you would hate me!"

“I will be very close to hating you if you don’t let me down this instant,” he huffed.

Thor set Loki down and grinned at the blush filling up Loki’s face. Loki indignantly smoothed down the front of his shirt and tried to look angry, though it had all the effect of a puffed-up bird.

“This is very ill-advised, you know,” Loki said softly, brushing a bit of hair behind his ear.

“Father...and Mother, they can’t know what we just did. It would ruin you.”

“Don’t worry about that just now. Don’t worry about anything at all.” Thor could not stop grinning. His head was spinning. He could hardly believe it was real. He had *kissed* Loki. His brother. And Loki had allowed it, and liked it.

Loki smirked and rolled his eyes. “Easy for you to say. You have nothing *to* worry about. I’ll be the one thrown out if this is discovered, you know. They’ll say I tricked you.”

“I’ll deny it, before every last one of our forefathers. And then before those same forefathers, I will declare my love for you.”

Loki couldn’t hide his smile, no matter how fervently he tried. It drove Thor mad how adorable, how desirable he looked in that moment.

“You cause me stress beyond belief, Brother,” Loki said. “Why do I continue to bear it?”

“I cannot say, but I am eternally glad that you do.”

Chapter 4

Even though Thor did not manage any sleep that night, he was bursting with energy by the time morning came in earnest. Regrettably, Loki did not make an appearance at breakfast, but Thor could forgive that considering he was probably sleeping in. His first task of the day was always his lessons with Odin—typically a boring affair, but Thor doubted anything could dampen his spirits today.

Odin noticed as much once they were both in his study chamber.

“You’re rather happy, son,” he remarked amusedly as he took his seat. “Did you enjoy your time with the girls yesterday?”

“Hmm?” Thor had completely forgotten about them. “Oh, right! They were all right.”

Odin chuckled. “More than just ‘all right’, I should hope. One of them will be your queen. Your duty to her will be even more important than your duty to Asgard.”

“I mean, they were pretty and everything, Father, I just didn’t feel anything for them.”

“You won’t, at least not right away. A king still has his responsibilities to bear, regardless of whether he finds them palatable. You are a servant for your people, Thor. Selfishness cannot bear a crown.”

“I know, Father.” Thor nodded. He’d heard such things many times before.

“We’ll discuss it later. As for today, I believe we were up in our history to the beginnings of the war with Jotunheim.”

Thor was suddenly uncomfortable. “Right,” he said. He reached for the book in front of him and thumbed through to the chapter they’d left off on.

“Most of it should be information you already know,” said Odin. “Such as how it began.”

“Yes. The Frost Giants tried to take over Midgard. And you stopped them.”

Odin nodded. “That is the gist of it. Although there were other factors that led to my decision to—”

“And you also took the Casket of Ancient Winters,” Thor continued, unsure of what spurred him onward. “And you took Loki too.” He paused. “I mean...Loki says that you did.”

Odin paused, his single eye unreadable. He blinked once, then sat back in his chair. “Yes,” he remarked. “I did.”

“I understand why you took the Casket, but...I don’t understand why you would—”

“I did not go to Jotunheim with the intent of bringing your brother home with me,” Odin explained. “When I found him, he had already been abandoned. I could not leave him there.”

Thor nodded somewhat mechanically. “But...why would you not tell him? He had to find out on his own. I didn’t even know.”

“Would you have your own brother feel alienated and different in his own home?”

“Of course not. But...” He paused, biting his lip for a moment. “Loki said that you told him you wanted peace with Jotunheim, and that that was why you took him in.”

“Well.” Odin shrugged. “He’s not wrong. It does not change the fact that he is my son, and your brother.”

“When I’m king,” Thor asked, “what will Loki’s duties to the realm be?”

“He will have his own responsibilities. One day he will be Asgard’s emissary and help us begin to repair the damage between us and Jotunheim.”

Thor cocked an eyebrow. “Would...that even be a smart idea? I mean, if the Frost Giants find out that he is one of them, but has lived as one of us...would they not feel betrayed?”

Odin smiled wearily. “Do not worry yourself over it, son. I would not do anything to endanger him.”

“Is Asgard even close to rebuilding any sort of peace with Jotunheim?” Thor asked, the questions flooding out of him. “If we have taken their greatest relic hostage, how can we expect them to trust us even now?”

There was a moment of silence, in which Odin simply watched Thor’s face. Thor held his tongue, not trusting himself to continue. He was on the verge of saying something truly disrespectful.

Eventually, the All-Father sighed and sat up straight again. “There are many complications to being king, and many complications to negotiating peace between two realms as different as Asgard and Jotunheim. The Frost Giants have proven themselves untrustworthy. *Laufey* is untrustworthy. He is a poor king, one whose actions have damned his people to a punishment they would not have to endure otherwise. To simply return the Casket to them would be the decision of a king who is not steadfast in his resolve.”

Thor nodded. “I understand, but...if Loki’s supposed to help with the peace, why isn’t he here learning about all this with me?”

“Don’t worry about that, son. Loki has his own lessons. He is learning what he needs to know.”

“But you weren’t planning on telling him that he was a Frost Giant until he found out on his own.” Thor couldn’t stop the words from falling out. There was a flash of anger in Odin’s eye, and Thor had the grace to look away.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I’m sorry, Father. I know you had your reasons.”

“As I said before,” said Odin, “I did not want him to feel alienated. Your brother may have been born in Jotunheim, but he is no longer one of them. He is of Asgard, and you would do well to remember that.”

The rest of the day went as normal, with no further confrontations. It was another beautiful day, so Thor was glad to have weapons practice after lunch. On some days he would catch a glimpse of Loki watching him from beneath a nearby tree, but he was nowhere to be seen today. It did not worry him, for it was hardly a common occurrence to begin with.

It was not until dinner time that Thor began to worry, as Loki did not appear for this meal either.

“Mother?” Thor asked. “Have you seen Loki today?”

Frigga nodded. “I have; we had our lessons as usual. He did say he was not feeling well, so he has probably gone to bed early.”

And so, after dinner, Thor went straight to Loki’s room and knocked on the door.

“Please go away,” came a miserable voice from within.

“Loki, it’s me,” Thor called. “Are you all right?”

“No,” Loki snapped back. “Go away.”

“What’s wrong? Are you sick? Mother said you were—”

“Thor.”

“Was it me? Was it something I did?”

“*Thor.*”

“Did I—” Thor leaned in close to the door and lowered his voice “—did I give you that disease they say you get from kissing—”

“*NO, Thor!*”

“Well, what is it then!?”

There was silence, one long enough that Thor thought Loki was finally ignoring him for good. Just as he was about to give up and leave, he heard his brother’s voice say, “Just...you can come in, but shut the door, and don’t laugh.”

Thor threw the door opened and stepped inside, turning the lock behind him. The lights were all out, only a dim moonbeam from the window illuminating the floor. There was a lump of blankets and sheets on Loki’s bed.

“Are you okay?” Thor asked, nudging the lump gently. The mass of blankets rolled over and Loki’s miserable face poked out from between the sheets. Thor could not see him clearly in this dim light, but something seemed off.

“No,” Loki whined. “I don’t know what’s wrong. I thought it was my stomach, but....”

“Do you want me to go get Mother?” Thor asked. “Or one of the healers?” He briefly touched Loki’s forehead to see if he was running a fever, but found it was quite the opposite: Loki’s skin was freezing cold.

“No,” Loki insisted. “You can’t tell anybody. ...Can’t you see?”

Loki pulled the sheets around his face down just the slightest; Thor leaned closer and saw what was so different.

Loki’s face looked exactly as it had years ago when he’d touched the Casket. His eyes a dull red, raised lines all across his cheeks, and dark blue skin: somehow, he had become a Jotun again.

“Loki...” Thor whispered, “what’d you do?”

“Nothing!” Loki insisted, lifting the sheets over his mouth until only his eyes were visible. “I didn’t do anything, I just...I started to feel sick after last night, after...what we did. And I thought I was just tired, I thought it would go away, but all day, all *day*, Thor, I could barely keep it together. I tried everything to keep myself looking normal...it started with my hands, and then my arms, and my neck...I don’t know how long it’s going to stay like this, Thor. I don’t know what to do.”

“Look, it’ll be all right,” Thor said, kneeling down next to the bed and reached out for the blanket. He tugged it away from Loki’s mouth only to have it yanked back into place.

“What if it doesn’t go away?” Loki asked frantically.

“Don’t panic. This is probably just something that happens to all Frost Giants.”

“Frost Giants look like this all the time, Thor!” Loki shouted. “What if the spell Father put on me is wearing off? He has to cast it again. I cannot walk around like this.”

“So...weren’t you playing around with shapeshifting magic before? Maybe something backfired on a spell you tried earlier.”

Loki shook his head. “I don’t think so. It doesn’t feel the same.”

Thor pondered this. “Okay,” he said, standing up. “Wait here for just a minute.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to go to the library for a moment.”

“You? The library?”

“Yes! Just wait there a moment, and I will be right back.”

It took him nearly forty-five minutes, but finally, finally, deep in the dustiest unused bookshelves of the library, Thor managed to find a book on Jotun biology. There had been plenty on the wars between Jotunheim and nearly every other realm, many stories and poetry about Jotun monsters, and a few picture books about Jotunheim’s history. But there was one, thankfully, that was exactly what Thor needed. He hurried back to Loki’s room with the tome in hand.

“Loki,” he said, knocking excitedly, “it’s me again.”

“Come in.”

Thor rushed inside and plopped down on the floor beside Loki’s bed. “All right, this is the only book I could find, so let’s hope the answer is in here somewhere. I don’t *really* want to make a trip out to the city library, but...”

Loki poked his head over the mattress edge. “What is that?”

Thor lifted up the cover. “A book about Frost Giants! Maybe this will help us figure out what’s wrong with you.”

Thor could not tell for certain, but he was reasonably confident that Loki was smiling behind the blanket. “That is a big book to go through all on your own,” he said.

“Well, let’s see....” Thor flipped it open and read through the table of contents. “I don’t see

anything in here about diseases...maybe...anatomy? No...hmm....”

Loki burrowed further down into his lump of linen. “I am going to try to rest,” he murmured. “Let me know if you need my help.”

“Okay.”

Thor spent nearly an hour reading each chapter in as much detail as he could understand, and coming up with nothing. There was nothing at all to describe what could be happening to Loki, and as he read on, he had a sinking suspicion as to why. There was no record of any Jotun-turned-Aesir in all the Nine Realms. Loki, as far as he knew, was the only one. What if he had some sickness that could never be cured? What if Odin’s spell had somehow been killing him all this time?

Thor immediately threw the thought from his mind. There *was* a solution. He knew it was here. At least something to point him in the right direction....

“‘Although all Jotnar can be considered intersex,’” Thor read under his breath, “‘only a few...are able to reproduce...among these types of Jotnar...are a smaller subset that can...bear children...in their early adulthood these Jotnar will enter an...estrous cycle...during which they may conceive....’”

Thor laid the book down on his knees and sighed. He barely understood a word of it. It couldn’t apply to Loki anyway—Loki was a boy, he couldn’t bear children.

The mound of blankets on the bed moved and Loki poked his red eyes out again. “Did you find anything?” he mumbled sleepily.

“I’m still looking,” Thor said reassuringly, reaching out to touch his cheek. “Hey, what does ‘intersex’ mean?”

Loki blinked and yawned widely. “It means a lot of things, but usually people mean it like having both male and female parts. Why?”

Thor frowned and looked back at the paragraph he had just read. “...This says that...all Jotnar can be considered intersex.” He glanced back up at Loki. “Does that mean...you are too?”

“Um.” Loki was silent for a moment, averting his eyes from Thor’s gaze.

“Are you?” Thor asked again, eyes wide.

Loki pulled the blanket over his face and mumbled miserably, “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Loki,” Thor said incredulously, sitting up on his knees next to the bed. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Because it’s none of your business? Did you ever think of that?”

“But I’ve seen you...you know. When we were little. I didn’t notice.”

“I didn’t notice either until a few years ago, all right!?” Loki shouted, his voice muffled.

“Loki, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. This book right here says that all Jotnar are like that. It’s just because you’re a Jotun. There’s nothing *wrong* with you.”

Loki only groaned. Thor chewed his lip, searching for something else—something hopefully not *stupid* as usual—to say. “Does...anybody else know? Does Mother know?”

"I've tried to tell her. I can never work up the courage."

"Well, I'll keep it a secret for you. If you want me to." Thor frowned. "Not that I think anybody would *ask* me about it, but...I swear, I won't say a word if you don't want me to."

A pause. "Thank you," Loki whispered.

"I do have one last question, though."

"Yes?"

"This book says something about...hold on." Thor reached for the book behind him and found the paragraph again. "An...estrous cycle. Am I saying that right? Ess-truss...?"

The blanket was yanked away from Loki's face, his red eyes staring wide. "It says *what*," he asked flatly.

"Something about an estrous cycle. That some Jotnar can bear children and they have this sort of thing...what is it?"

Loki lifted himself up on his elbows and stared at Thor in horrified desperation. "Thor, that means I'm *in heat*!"

Thor stared back and blinked a few times. "You mean...like how the dogs—"

"Yes, Thor!! Like an animal!"

Loki's eyes were getting that familiar glisten again; Thor knew at any moment he would burst into tears. He wracked his brain furiously for a way to stop it.

"Hey, well it's not...that bad, it's just something natural, you know," he stammered aimlessly. "I mean it could be worse! You could be having the same kind of monthly cycle Sif got a few years ago, remember how much pain she was in?"

Loki pressed his face into his pillow and began to cry.

"Loki, no!" Thor pleaded, throwing the book aside and crawling onto the bed. "It's okay! Please don't cry. There's nothing wrong with you."

"How can you say there's nothing wrong!?" Loki shouted. "I'm a disgusting, deformed bitch in heat!"

"You are not any of those things! It's just the way your body works, Loki!"

"I *hate* this body! I hate this, I hate Frost Giants, I hate *myself*! Everybody in Asgard is going to know I'm a monster now! Oh gods, when Fandral hears...do you know how often he made fun of me saying I was on my monthlies!? I will never hear the end of it!"

Thor cringed inwardly; of course he knew. He had been in on that joke as well. He reached over and patted Loki between the shoulders.

"Loki, it will be all right," Thor said, softening his voice. "It will probably only last for a few days."

"I can't stay in my room for a few days without anybody asking any questions," Loki said, sniffing. "Somebody's going to find out. Somebody's going to find out and they're going to throw

me out. Or they might kill me, Thor....”

“Hey.” Thor leaned down and touched the back of Loki’s head. “That’s enough of that. Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” Loki shouted, lifting his head and snarling. “You’re not the one who looks like a freak!”

“You’re *not* a freak.” It was a struggle not to yell back; Thor knew well enough from experience that as soon as they both raised their voices, they would not get anywhere. “You’re my brother. I’ve told you this before.”

Loki laid his head back down, sniffing and fighting back any further tears. “What am I going to do?”

“Right now? You’re just going to relax. I’m going to stay with you tonight.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t have to do a lot of things.” Thor leaned down and kissed Loki on the cheek. His skin was cold in a refreshing sort of way: not at all what Thor would have expected. He had almost expected it to be akin to touching the Casket of Ancient Winters. In some ways, it was almost better than Loki’s skin as it normally was.

Thor sat up and smoothed down Loki’s hair. “I’m going to go get my sleeping clothes from my room,” he explained. “I’ll be right back, I promise.”

“Whatever.”

Thor left and headed for his own chambers; if anybody stopped him asking what he was doing, so be it. If the servants saw him and talked, then he would deal with it later.

When he returned, he changed his clothes in a secluded corner of the room and then snuggled into bed next to his brother. Loki did not seem to be giving off body heat anymore, but rather a pleasing chill. Well, Thor’s body heat should be enough for the both of them. Thor nestled up behind Loki, wrapping his arm over his shoulder and placing a kiss there.

“You can’t be caught in my room,” Loki said miserably, even as he wriggled backwards deeper into Thor’s embrace.

“Don’t worry about me,” Thor replied, pressing another kiss to Loki’s shoulder. He liked the feel of this new skin on his lips. It felt smoother somehow. He wanted to lick it, just to see...but he knew Loki would not take kindly to that, and so he resisted.

Loki awoke suddenly in the middle of the night. He could not say why, but perhaps it was the stabbing pain in his lower abdomen. He curled tightly around himself and groaned softly into the pillow. He was miserable, he was a freak, and soon enough Thor would get tired of him and stop caring so much.

He heard Thor’s soft, even breathing at his ear and relaxed just a little. His brother was still here, for whatever reason. Loki had expected him to leave in the night once Loki himself had fallen asleep. Not so, it appeared...he was still here, still with his strong, solid arms around him.

Loki shifted experimentally, but Thor did not stir. Slowly, carefully, Loki flipped over and looked his brother in the face. The light was dim, but Loki had never had much trouble seeing in the dark. He figured this was because Jotunheim was a dark land, full of caverns and ravines. Maybe his disgusting Jotun blood was good for *one* thing out of a thousand.

Thor slept soundly and deeply. Loki smiled a bit, recalling how he had used to draw on Thor's sleeping face in their younger days; he knew nothing could wake Thor when he was this far gone.

Loki had always admired his brother's features. Thor took after Odin so clearly, with the strong jaw and hard eyes of a king. With one shift in expression, Thor could go from a laughing, harmless boy to a berserker warrior rampaging for blood. In truth, Loki had always feared that look, but it thrilled him just the same. He had always been attracted to danger, with the intention of outsmarting that which could easily kill him. It was why he had made a game of taunting the hunting dogs as a child, why he had ventured among the poison flowers in the woods.

It always excited him to know that no matter how old they both got, no matter how powerful and how mighty Thor became, Loki would always be just slightly out of reach.

He could not truly hope to match his brother otherwise, could he?

Thor was meant for greater things than Loki. Better things than loving him. Why did he debase himself so? Thor seemed to think that he hid his emotions well, but Loki had seen the change in his eyes over these past months. In the beginning, it frightened him. Loki had learned to stuff down his own feelings for Thor over the years because *he* actually had some self-control. Loki knew that it could be nothing more than a dream. Thor, on the other hand, had never been held back by such silly things. Loki loved Thor, in ways that he shouldn't, but he was not foolish enough to believe that pursuit of such a thing would end in anything but destruction.

Loki lied to others so easily. Yet lying to himself was a different matter entirely. As much as he told himself that he did not want this, that he *could* not, that he did not deserve the love of a brother, or the love of something more, he could not believe it. He wanted it so badly it ached. He wanted Thor. He wanted *this*. Of all the people in Asgard, only Thor had ever even tried to treat him like something worthy.

Once Thor was king, he would lose that. Once Thor married, Loki would not matter anymore. He would forever be second in Thor's heart. He could not bear that. Loki was second to *everybody*; why could he not just have this one thing?

Loki reached out and touched Thor's upturned cheek. There was the hint of stubble there, and a strong, defined jawbone. Thor did not stir in the slightest as Loki ran his fingertips up and down his face. Loki curled his fingers under Thor's chin and lightly drew his thumb across his lips. Weathered, chapped, but they left the most exquisite sensation on Loki's skin. He thought about the first time Thor had kissed him every single day. The moment when he had taken Loki's head in hand and pressed his lips against his forehead. Loki hadn't doubted for an instant after that that Thor returned the feelings he had kept secret for many, many years.

Still, he didn't understand why. There were a thousand good, honorable paths laid out before Thor; why did he turn to the one path that would ruin him?

Loki moved in closer and cautiously pressed a kiss to Thor's lips. As he did, he felt his heart swell and break all at once. This would never last. They would never wake up next to each other; this may well be the last night Loki ever had Thor in his bed. Of all the things Loki had ever wished for, he would gladly be denied all of them if he could just have this. If he could just have Thor.

You will never have him, he told himself. You know that you will not and you are a foolish child for indulging yourself. Get rid of him now. It will never be easier.

Loki knew he had to end it. He had to tell Thor they couldn't do this. He didn't know when, or how, but it had to stop.

He sighed and turned back over. It was the estrous cycle that was making him so emotional. He would wake up tomorrow and feel fine again. At least, he prayed that he might.

The next morning, Loki was awakened by the sudden movements of Thor next to him. He blinked his eyes open, and then remembered the events of the day before. He rolled over and saw Thor attempting to silently leave the room.

"Thor?" he called out sleepily. His brother jumped and whirled around.

"I'm sorry! Did I wake you?" Thor asked, cringing.

"Yes...you did." Loki stretched and yawned.

Thor padded back over to the bed and put his hand on Loki's cheek. "Are you feeling any better this morning?"

"Not really. I wish I were dead." Loki jerked away and pulled the blankets over his face. He didn't even want to imagine what he must look like right now.

Thor gently pulled the blankets away. "Loki, I have to tell Mother and Father about what is happening to you," he said softly, with his most reasonable, king-like tone of voice. "I promise I won't let anybody else know."

"They will both say I am a freak, and disown me as their son." Loki did not want to hear Thor's rationale of anything. He may as well expect today to be his last day in Asgard. There was no way at all to keep this a secret any longer.

"I will not allow them to say such things," Thor declared, keeping his eyes steady on Loki's face.

Loki glared at his brother miserably. Even if the kiss from the other day had been as wonderful for Thor as it had been for him, there was no way Thor would want to continue staying with him now. Now they were both forced to see that Loki was too different from him. Nothing about his being a Jotun would go away, no matter what they did. Thor would never accept him this way.

"Stop looking at me like that," Loki eventually muttered, drawing the blanket up over his face again. "I know I'm ugly like this."

"You are *not*," Thor insisted. "You look the same, only bluer. And blue is a not a bad color! I like it on you."

"You are just saying that."

"I am saying it *and* I mean it." Thor got to his feet and Loki peeked out from the bundle of sheets.

"Listen now. I am going to go speak to Mother and Father, and then I will bring you breakfast. I'll make sure nobody comes in here unless it's one of us three, all right?"

Loki only glared and burrowed himself further into the cocoon he'd made. Thor knew that the

absence of a “no” might as well mean “yes” when it was coming from Loki, so he sighed and left the room.

After he had gone back to his own room and changed, he went to the dining room where the family always took their meals together. Odin and Frigga were already there, as usual; Frigga greeted her eldest son with a smile.

“Good morning, son,” she said sweetly, setting down her cup of tea.

“Good morning, Mother,” Thor replied as he took his seat.

“Where is your brother? Is he still feeling ill?”

Thor glanced around the room: a few servants were hanging about, bringing food to and from the kitchen. “Yes,” Thor said carefully, “but there is something I need to talk to you about in private.”

Odin looked up. “Has something happened?”

“I’d rather not talk about it here,” was all Thor would say.

Odin paused a moment, and then turned to the nearest servant and dismissed her from the room. He waited until her companions followed her, leaving the dining room empty save the three of them.

“What’s this about?” Odin asked quietly, though not without concern.

Thor took in a deep breath. “Loki turned into a Frost Giant last night. I mean...he looks like one now.”

Frigga’s eyes widened and she turned to look at her husband.

“We read some books about it,” Thor continued. “And he’s in some kind of...Jotun heat cycle. But he doesn’t feel well and he won’t come out of his room as long as he is looking the way he does now.”

“Heat cycle?” Odin repeated, frowning as he pondered that. “I have never heard of such a thing happening to Jotnar.”

“I hadn’t either, but from what I read I think he is going to be all right. But please, you cannot tell anybody.”

“I will go see him after breakfast,” Frigga said. “Perhaps there is something I can do.”

And so, after breakfast Thor found himself knocking anxiously at Loki’s door, Frigga and Odin standing a respectable distance away behind him.

“Who is it?” Loki croaked out worriedly.

“It’s me,” Thor replied. “I brought Mother and Father. Can we come in to see you?”

There was a worrisome silence, and then Loki finally answered, “Fine.”

Thor turned back to his parents and waved them in as he held open the door. Once the family was safely inside Loki’s room, Thor walked over to Loki’s bed and gently pulled the blanket away from his face.

“Loki,” he said gently, “are you feeling all right?”

Loki nodded, gazing past Thor at Odin and Frigga's faces. Frigga was smiling as she crossed the room to sit on the edge of Loki's bed. She reached out and gently stroked Loki's forehead.

"Hello, my son," she said. "You seem to have come down with a peculiar ailment."

Loki rolled his eyes and tried to look indignant, but he leaned into Frigga's touch all the same. "I feel terrible," he admitted.

"How long has this been going on?" Odin asked, stepping forward to take a closer look. His expression was unreadable.

"Since yesterday," Loki said. "I tried to stop it, Father. I'm sorry."

Odin watched his youngest son's face for a moment, and then his features softened. "You have nothing to be sorry for, son. I should have known something like this would happen eventually."

"Can you not just cast whatever spell you cast before? Make me look normal again?" Loki asked desperately, searching Odin's face for some sign that he could fix this. The All-Father could fix everything, after all.

Odin reached down and touched the side of Loki's face. Loki kept his eyes focused on the one good eye of his father, waiting for he didn't know what. After a moment of complete silence, Odin drew his hand away and sighed. "Forgive me, Loki, but I cannot."

"What if I look like this forever?" Loki exclaimed, turning his eyes now to his mother.

"Hush, dear," Frigga said soothingly, brushing a bit of his hair away from his eyes. "Thor told us you were undergoing a very natural cycle that Jotnar must endure. When it ends, you will most likely return to the appearance you have always had."

"Please don't tell anyone," Loki begged, staring at his father beseechingly. "*Please*, Father. I'm sorry, but please, please don't tell anybody about this. I'm so sorry."

Odin sighed again, looking at his son with deep contemplation. "It will be difficult to explain your absence."

"Say I am sick then! Say I have some contagious disease! Please, Father, I have tried everything, I don't know how to make this go away!"

"I did not say I would declare this before the whole of Asgard. I merely said it would be difficult. If there is nothing to be done, then you have my leave to stay holed up in this room until the cycle has passed."

"I'll stay with you, Loki," Thor piped up immediately.

"No, you will not," Odin snapped back.

"Father," Thor protested. "He doesn't want anybody else to see him. Who is going to bring him his food, or be with him when he is lonely, or—"

"You have responsibilities, Thor. How many times must I remind you of your duty before it sticks?"

"I thought self-sacrifice for the good of the people was one of my duties," Thor said brazenly. "Loki is my *brother*. He should be the one person I protect above all else."

“I don’t need your pity, Thor!” Loki exclaimed.

“Take care how you speak to your brother,” said Odin.

There was a tense silence, eventually broken by Frigga as she said, “There would be no need for Thor to miss any of his lessons. If Loki wishes for Thor to come see him, then I do not see a reason why we should disallow it. Thor has enough free time during the day to tend to Loki’s every need.”

“I am not a baby in need of a nursemaid!” Loki protested again, sitting up straight in bed.

“Then stay in your chambers and starve!” Odin shouted, fed up with the entire affair. “The palace does not exist to bend to your every whim, Loki.”

“That’s quite enough,” Frigga said, her voice raised only slightly. The tension in the room dampened, and she went on: “Thor, as long as you continue your lessons, you may assist your brother in any way he needs. And Loki, I promise that nobody else need know what has happened.” She looked up and scanned the room. “Are we agreed?”

“That is fine,” Odin grumbled.

Thor nodded profusely, grinning wide as he did so. “Yes! Thank you, Mother!”

Loki groaned and buried himself deeper in his blankets. Frigga patted the bundle and got to her feet. “It will all be all right, my love.”

“I want everybody out,” Loki mumbled from deep within the mound. “Also I am hungry.”

“I’ll bring you something to eat, Loki,” Thor said eagerly. Odin sighed heavily and left the room with Frigga close behind.

As it turned out, Loki’s estrous cycle only lasted for a week. Thor stayed with him as much as he was able; when he was not outside practicing or going over old books with Odin, he was with his brother. He brought Loki all his meals, read to him, and even brought the toy soldiers from his room.

Loki struggled to find an excuse to tell Thor to leave him alone and never touch him again. But Loki was practical if nothing else, and he knew that hurting Thor now would leave Loki alone for the rest of this heat cycle and probably more miserable than he could bear. It would have to wait until this was all over. Each night, he would not allow Thor to sleep beside him in his bed again. Thor complied, making himself a nest of blankets and pillows on the floor. He attempted kisses almost every day, but Loki refused them every time.

Thor hadn’t bothered to hide his disappointment, though he hadn’t gone so far as to force himself on his brother. Clearly he had been hoping that all this private time together would allow them to experiment further, but it was truly the last thing on Loki’s mind.

As Loki understood it, the estrous cycle was the time for Jotnar to conceive and reproduce, but he could not imagine allowing anybody, not even Thor, near him right now. He felt miserable, sick, and disgusting—not at all a desirable mate. What was worse was he had no idea if that was normal or not. Perhaps it was a symptom of this being his first heat; perhaps it was indicative of a bigger problem. He did not know, but he was glad that he was at least not horny on top of everything.

On the sixth day, Loki’s blue color began to recede, and when he woke up on the seventh day, he

had completely returned to his Asgardian appearance. Thor had made a trip to the city library for more books on Jotun biology, and they learned that Loki could expect the cycle to return only once a year.

“So I guess...it’s over just like that?” Thor said, shutting the book. Loki shrugged. He was standing before his mirror, pulling a comb through his disheveled hair. He had not bothered to dress or maintain his appearance for a week, and he was sorely regretting it now.

“It would appear to be.” He winced as the comb teeth snagged on a snarled mat of hair.

Thor giggled. “It’s almost weird seeing you this way again. I had gotten used to the blue skin.”

“Well, hopefully you’ll never have to see it again,” Loki huffed, patting his hair down.

“I don’t know. I kind of liked it.” He paused. “Your skin felt different. In a good way.”

“Hmm,” Loki replied noncommittally. “I’m glad it’s gone. I don’t look like such a monster anymore.”

“You didn’t before. You looked like you’re supposed to look. The way a Frost Giant looks.”

“If you say so, Thor.”

Thor stood and walked up behind Loki, wrapping his arms around his waist. Loki sighed. “What are you doing?”

“Telling you how nice you look,” Thor replied, breathing in the scent of Loki’s hair. In all truth, he could do with a bath after so many days in bed, but it hardly mattered. “I don’t want you to say those things about yourself.”

“It’s only the things *everybody* says about Frost Giants.”

Thor nuzzled into Loki’s neck, pressing tiny kisses in the soft skin there. Loki whined a bit and lifted his shoulder. “Stop that, it tickles.”

“You didn’t let me kiss you this whole week,” Thor protested, setting his chin on Loki’s shoulder. Loki sighed again, staring at him through the mirror. He could not delay any longer. He had to push him away.

“Maybe we should not kiss again,” Loki said softly, hating the smile on Thor’s face. He looked so happy, so at peace, and so content...why couldn’t he see that this was a terrible idea that neither of them should have ever indulged?

Thor frowned, feigning contemplation. “I don’t like that as much as kissing,” he said, squeezing Loki’s torso with strong, muscular arms.

“I’m serious!” Loki exclaimed, grabbing Thor’s arms and pulling them away. He turned around to face his brother, Thor’s eyes full of surprise and confusion now.

“I just turned into a monster in heat for an entire week!” Loki shouted. “You really want to do that over again with me every year!? Thor, don’t you understand, you idiot? We have to *stop* this!”

Thor’s eyes darkened, all his happiness from before withering away. He swallowed tightly and said, “What if I don’t want to stop it? What if I love you?”

Loki laughed humorlessly. “You don’t love me. Not that way. You love me like a brother, and

even *that* is a tentative description. This is a terrible, *terrible* idea. We can't do it anymore."

Thor stared at the floor, pondering that, and nodded. "I understand what you are saying. But is that what you want?"

"It. Doesn't. *Matter*," Loki hissed. Why wouldn't Thor just listen? He wasn't the one who had everything to lose. He wasn't the one who would be punished should any of this come to light. Odin would surely abandon his goodwill once he discovered that the little Jotun monster he'd let into his home years ago had seduced his only son.

"That's not what I asked you," Thor said, looking him straight in the eye, his voice firm and steady. "What do *you* want, Loki?"

"I want you to leave me alone! Stop tormenting me! You keep teasing me with all these things I can never have, and once you're done with me you won't have lost a single thing. You'll get married and warm your bed with some *whore* and forget every word you are saying to me now."

"How can you truly think so little of me?" Thor actually looked hurt now, his blue eyes wide with betrayal. "Why do you never believe me?"

"Do you deny what I am saying? Unless your intent all this time was to use me for your pleasure and then discard me once you are betrothed?"

"That was never my intent!" Thor shouted, real anger flashing in his eyes. "You are such—I cannot believe how petty you are! All those girls who were meant to be my fiancée, I did not feel for any of them a fraction of what I feel for you! I could not look in any of their eyes without seeing you, I could not imagine a life with them by my side in place of you!"

"So go then!" Loki yelled back, gesturing to the door. "Go to our father and announce your intent to marry me! How do you imagine that will go over? Do you think his head will spin around, or maybe his one good eye will pop out onto the throne room floor?"

Thor had no response to that; he stood there, opening and closing his mouth as he fought desperately for words. In the end, Loki shook his head and turned back to the mirror.

"Get out," he declared.

In the mirror he saw Thor reach out and place a hand on his shoulder. Loki turned swiftly and slapped it away. "Do you intend to force yourself on me now?" he snapped. "I said leave!"

Thor only hesitated for a moment before he complied, closing the door softly behind him.

Chapter 5

The rest of the month went as normal. Thor resumed his lessons and practices; Loki continued his magic practice with Frigga. They crossed paths at meals and occasionally in the hallways, but did not speak to one another. Thor contented himself with spending more time with Sif and the others; he found that it drove Loki from his mind quite easily. During the daytime, anyway. At night, his mind was a storm.

He really had been foolish, giving in to his baseness. Loki knew how wrong it was; *Loki* had some sense. He had always had the most sense out of the two of them.

But Thor could not find it in himself to be truly angry at his brother. Loki's concerns were very real and founded. No amount of pleading and good graces would ever allow Odin and Frigga to approve of what they were doing. Certainly there was no precedent for a king who had married his brother. Least of all a brother who was a Jotun.

Was marriage what Thor wanted with Loki anyway? It had crossed his mind more than once, in what were maybe his more vulnerable moments, yet...perhaps all he wanted was to ensure that Loki would never leave him. The more he thought of it, the more he forced himself not to think of it: he could not, he simply *never* would be able to marry Loki in a thousand eons, in any of the Nine Realms.

Becoming king of Asgard would not give him the power to change that.

Maybe this was for the best. Thor had been allowed to give in and kiss Loki at least once. He had been allowed to tell his brother how he felt. If it stopped now, then could he really say that he regretted any of it?

Still, no matter how much "reason" he tried to persuade himself with, he pined for his brother. Just catching a glimpse of Loki in the hallway would set his heart racing. He found himself staring at Loki while he ate, watching the way his fingers held the silverware. It drove him mad. He wanted to touch Loki again, just feel his skin, hold his hands, kiss him all over.... There had to be something he could do to salvage this. There had to be some way to show Loki that he was serious, that he did not see any of this as a child's game. That he did not see Loki as anything that he would ever want to discard.

Eventually, Thor realized the day of their monthly trip was approaching. He was certain Loki remembered it too. Thor went to Loki's door and knocked, only to be met with silence. He did so three nights in a row, each time with the same result. He did not want to ask about it at meals in front of their parents, nor could he catch Loki alone in the palace during the day. In the end, Thor resorted to writing a short letter the night before.

I would like to continue our bargain. If you do as well, then meet with me in the gardens tomorrow morning.

He slipped it under Loki's door and went back to bed for a sleepless night.

Thor tried to be surprised when Loki showed up the next day, but in his heart he'd known that Loki would come.

Loki glared at him coldly from underneath the tree that served as their usual meeting-place. "This

is ill-advised,” he grumbled.

“Assuredly,” Thor agreed. “I’d like to do it anyway.”

Few words were spoken between them as they gathered their horses and headed off towards the river. There was a slight chill in the air this month as summer began to wind down. Thor didn’t mind so much, as they didn’t need perfect weather for what he had planned today.

When they finally arrived at the river, it felt like it had been years since their last visit. Had it only been a few months ago that Loki had guided him through catching a fish, since they had nearly kissed beneath that tree? After watering their horses sufficiently, Thor took both reins and tied them off to a nearby tree.

“So,” Loki said, crossing his arms and pacing up and down the bank. He stared out at the water, the wind kicking up tiny ripples along its surface. “Here we are again. Will you continue to drag me out here when this river is frozen over and the snow is up to our knees?”

“If that’s what you want,” Thor replied, fumbling nervously with the object in his pocket. “Here, um...Loki, would you come over here for a minute?”

Thor beckoned him over to a nearby tree—the same one where he had kissed his brother for the first time. He was not sure if Loki would remember it, but a gut instinct told him that he did.

Thor sat on the ground and Loki did the same. He looked at Thor suspiciously. “What is it?” he asked, his voice weary.

“All right, erm....” Thor fidgeted, staring down at his hands. “I have been doing some more reading. About Jotnar.” He watched Loki’s eyes to see if that had elicited any reaction. It did not.

So Thor continued: “I’ve learned quite a bit that I didn’t know before. Like...they all—I mean you all, or—well, Jotnar anyway, they have more than two genders, did you know that? I don’t remember the names, but there’s more than men and women, there’s four different...kinds of....” He paused, gazing up into Loki’s ice cold eyes. “Four genders. You know. But that’s not what I wanted to tell you.”

“Mm-hmm.” Loki’s expression did not change.

“Well, not every Jotun has the cycle that you did. Only some of them can bear children, and only those Jotnar go into heat. I read that when that happens for the first time, the Jotun is celebrated, because it means they can bring new life into the world.” He reached for the little box in his pocket and pulled it out. “They can get all sorts of presents for it, kind of like a birthday, but there’s this traditional gift, a sort of hair jewelry that is usually reserved for royalty....”

Thor opened the box and pulled out a deep green emerald the size of a quail’s egg, set in a bright golden brooch. Thin gold chains hung down in a series of graceful arcs, reflecting what little sunlight reached through the leaves. Loki stared, his lips parted, speechless and bewildered.

“This is, um...” Thor continued, holding the emerald in his palm, the chains swinging lightly in the wind, “it took me a while to find this. I think somebody must have taken it for spoils during the war, but I did as much reading as I could and this definitely belonged to Jotun royalty. You, um... you’re supposed to wear it in your hair.”

Thor turned the emerald around, revealing a hair clip on the back of the golden brooch. He sat up on his knees and extended a hand towards Loki’s hair.

“Um...may I?”

Loki nodded, still at a loss for words.

Thor shuffled closer and took a few locks of Loki's black hair in hand. He had never even held a hair ornament before, much less put it in somebody's hair, but it couldn't be that difficult. He pulled the locks up over Loki's ear, opened the pin, and carefully set it in as tightly as he dared. When he let go, the emerald stayed, and he grinned.

“I probably should have brought a mirror,” he said, shuffling back over to his original spot, “but trust me, it looks great on you.”

Loki reached up and touched the emerald, gently as though it might puff into dust on contact. He stared deep into Thor's eyes, searching for some indication that this might be a joke, or some ill-gotten idea to win back Loki's good graces.

Because that was something Loki knew how to deal with. This, however....

“I mean,” Thor continued, rocking back restlessly, “you were just so upset after that week...you called yourself a lot of horrible things. Nothing I said was getting through to you. So I just... wanted to find a way that you would believe me when I said there was nothing wrong with you. I did a lot of reading about Jotunheim, there's so much I didn't know before. So I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry.”

Loki swallowed, his throat painfully dry. “Sorry for what?” he asked.

“Sorry for all the times I ever said something bad about Frost Giants in front of you. I just...it's a part of who you are and there's really nothing either of us can do to change that. I'm starting to understand that now. I just don't want you to ever think that it's some disgusting part of you that you have to be ashamed of.” He paused, scratched the back of his head, and continued: “So I just thought, you know...this is something Jotnar do, and you're Jotun, so it's only right you should get to do it too.”

There were a thousand things Loki could have said just then. A thousand ways he could have hurt Thor irrevocably, a thousand ways for him to break and burn the bridge that Thor was trying to rebuild. A million poisonous lies he could spit in his brother's face to push him away, ensure that Thor would never waste a second thought on him again, lock himself away for good and for all. His instinct told him to lie and spit and hurt and break. It was easy, it was what he knew. He could trust the outcome of that every time.

A hundred words flew about Loki's mind like hornets. *How dare you make a mockery of me? Do you think to treat me like a woman, coming back to me with jewels and trinkets? How do I know that you have not invented this entire insulting sham? So do you agree once and for all that I am not of your people and I never will be? Are you lying to me? Are you trying to hurt me? Why would you do this? How dare you? How dare you?*

He could have said any one of them, and torn Thor's heart into pieces. The words struggled and fought to break free of his lips, and he swallowed each of them down, chewing back the bitterness and shoving them deep into his heart, *his* distrusting soul that truly deserved it.

Loki bit his lip, opened his mouth, and instead, said, “Thank you. Thank you, Brother.” It was like handing a sharpened knife over to Thor and closing his eyes.

Thor's eyes widened and his face lit up. “Do you like it?”

“...I love it.” He could hardly believe what he was saying. Everything he knew told him this was a mistake. Every gut instinct in him cried out to stop this.

You are so stupid, his brain shouted. *What are you doing? Tell him you hate it!! You are so stupid, you are so STUPID, you ugly, deceitful child-monster—*

“I *love* it,” he repeated, louder. “It’s...I honestly can’t believe you did this.”

Thor grinned. “I thought a lot about what we...talked about a few weeks ago. And to be honest, I don’t know what the right thing to do is. But I figured that this was at least something I could do, because I like making you happy.”

Loki laughed. “You’re so damn sappy.”

“It’s the truth! You know that I love you.”

Loki bent his head down, covering his eyes with one hand. He did not know whether to laugh or cry, and figured he might as well do both. He heard Thor shift in front of him, and seconds later his familiar arms were wrapped gently around him. Loki returned the embrace, squeezing tightly and swearing that he would kill anybody that took this from him. He would not give Thor up. He could not.

Thor was pressing kisses to the top of his head, his hands moving up and down Loki’s back, and Loki could hear his heartbeat racing through his chest. Loki wriggled out of his embrace enough to lift his head and look Thor in the eyes. For an instant neither of them moved; they had reached a point where this could either be over, or it would never stop.

Thor moved first, placing his lips over his brother’s, and Loki allowed it. Thor’s mouth, warm and strong, opened to Loki’s, forcing his tongue inside like he owned it. Loki pulled Thor closer, wanting to touch and feel every part of him, wanting Thor’s air like it was his air.

It was the first time Loki had ever really noticed the extent of Thor’s strength; he realized now how easily Thor could have overtaken him during every other kiss, every other touch, how simple it would have been to be as rough as he liked. Loki’s heartbeat quickened and he could hear the pounding in his own ears. This excited him, he craved it, he wanted Thor’s hands all over him, he wanted Thor’s mouth all over him.

The thought struck him like lightning. He *desired* his brother. Not just his kisses, not just his touch and his declarations of love. Loki wanted all of Thor. His body, together with his own, entwined like lovers. Loki had no idea when that idea had been planted, but he felt it blossoming now, his heartfelt desire to have Thor take him in any way he chose.

Thor moved closer still, pressing into his brother until Loki was pushed up against the tree trunk. His strong, gentle fingers were around Loki’s head, kneading the back of his skull just a bit too hard. It was perfect. Loki whined in frustration as Thor pulled his lips away, but then Thor’s mouth was on Loki’s neck.

His stubble was abrasive against Loki’s smooth skin, though the feel of his warm tongue eased the pain. Thor nipped experimentally at Loki’s neck, not nearly hard enough, not nearly as hard as Loki knew he could stand. Loki leaned into it, grabbing fistfuls of Thor’s shirt. Unbidden, he opened his legs at the knees just the barest inch. He knew that he could easily tear Thor’s shirt from his body, just as easily as Thor himself could do anything he wanted to Loki at that moment. Loki would have allowed anything. He did not care to think rationally any longer.

There was a distant rumble of thunder overhead and Loki giggled. “Is that you, Brother?”

Thor sat up and frowned up at the clouds. “No. That is a natural storm coming.” He looked back at Loki. “We should probably go if we do not want to be caught.”

Loki crossed his arms and huffed. “Do we have to?”

“You know that I would not mind it. The horses, on the other hand....”

“But we just got here. Can’t we see if it will pass?”

Thor looked back up at the sky and sighed. “I suppose.” He gazed back at Loki and smirked. “It is not as though I am exactly in a hurry to leave....”

Thor went back to his neck, biting a little harder this time, his stubble and lips claiming and marking as much of Loki’s skin as he could find. Loki let his head fall back, interlacing his fingers in Thor’s golden hair. Slowly, inch by inch, Thor moved further down to the crook of his neck. He placed two fingers in Loki’s collar and pulled it aside, pressing his lips to the shoulder.

Loki shuddered and grabbed a tight hold on Thor’s hair. The thought of Thor’s mouth on other parts of his body besides his mouth sent a sharp swell of heat to his face. The experience of being unclothed with his brother was not a new one: they had grown up together after all. The thought of Thor seeing him was one thing; the thought of seeing Thor, in all his might and glory, was dizzying.

“Brother,” Loki breathed out, the word seeming to come on its own. “Brother, I want to see you.”

Thor lifted his head slowly. It seemed as though Loki had never truly seen his eyes before, never realized how exquisitely bright they were. “How do you mean?” he asked.

Loki loosened his grip on Thor’s hair as Thor sat up straighter. He raised his other hand to Thor’s face, fingertips tracing his jawline and feeling the soft sting of his growing beard. He let his fingers travel down, over Thor’s Adam’s apple, feeling the stretch of Thor’s throat muscles as he swallowed. Finally, he hooked his finger into the collar of Thor’s shirt, just as Thor himself as done, and pulled down to expose the barest amount of flesh beneath.

Thor’s hand immediately grabbed Loki by the wrist. Loki looked up, feigning shock, but saw that there was no mirth in his brother’s eyes.

“Loki,” Thor said, his voice a low rumble, “be serious. Please.” Was that the hint of a blush crossing Thor’s face?

“I am,” Loki insisted. “I am being extremely serious.” He knew for a fact that Thor wanted it too. How could he not, with the way he had been kissing Loki just now?

“If that is what you want, if that is what you *truly* want....” Thor’s voice trailed off, and he turned his eyes to the ground. “Brother, I do not know how.”

Loki could not stop the laugh before it escaped his lips. “You? Thor, Prince of Asgard, do not know *how*? Have you not had girls throwing themselves at you since the day your whiskers came in?”

“Loki,” Thor said warningly, the blush growing darker. “I am serious. If you truly wish for me to...to take you to bed, then I cannot. At least not yet.”

For a moment, Loki actually felt insulted. “Is it because you know I am deformed between the legs?”

“You are *not*, and *no*, that has nothing to do with it. I am just...I am not ready.”

Loki nodded, letting his hand fall from Thor’s hair. “That is fine,” he forced himself to say.

Another, louder roll of thunder sounded from the distance, and one of the horses neighed uncomfortably.

“We should head home,” Thor said, getting to his feet.

They managed to just barely outrun the rain. The downpour began in earnest just as they got to the stables and handed their horses off to the servants.

“I am soaked,” Loki groaned, squeezing rainwater from his shirt once they were inside. “And freezing. I’m going to have a bath.”

“All right,” Thor agreed. “I’m sorry our day was cut short.”

Loki waved a hand dismissively. “For what we did manage, I can’t say that I am dissatisfied.”

Thor chuckled, then looked up and down the hallway for any spectators. He took hold of Loki’s hand and placed a kiss on his fingers. “I will see you at dinner, Brother.”

Afterward, Loki sat in the warm waters of his bathtub, staring at the emerald in his palm. He could not fathom what Thor must have gone through to acquire it, though the fact that he had bothered to learn about it at all was what astounded Loki the most. He had never imagined Jotnar could craft jewelry of this caliber, with such precision and beauty. He had not thought the Jotnar bothered themselves with pretty things, instead he imagined that they lived in caves of ice and ventured out only in search of blood and war.

He had thought much the same thing of Thor, once.

Loki sunk his head beneath the water and sighed, large bubbles rising to the surface. He looked between his legs at the genitals he had tried to ignore for so long. For years Loki had believed that a cock was his only set of parts. It hadn’t been until sometime into puberty that he’d realized that the plump folds of flesh beneath it was not normal. The parts of a woman. Nobody else had both, it seemed, except for him. His heart sank. Of course Thor wouldn’t want anything like that. Even Thor had to draw a line at some point. Kissing his brother? Hardly an issue. Kissing a Jotun? It could be forgiven. Kissing his Jotun brother with no set of parts Thor had ever laid eyes on before?

He sighed again and came up out of the water. He stayed in the bath long past the point when the water went cold.

He debated wearing the hairpin to dinner. He wanted to show Thor his appreciation for the gift, but a part of him was afraid that Odin may somehow recognize it and disapprove. Whether Odin recognized it as Jotun jewelry or not, he still might not have approved of Loki wearing a hairpin like a woman.

In the end, he decided to leave it in his room. Perhaps he would only wear it for special occasions.

Dinner seemed to drag on forever. Loki wanted nothing more than to invite Thor back into his

room and savor every last hour of the day. He could not concentrate on his food or drink or any of the conversation their parents were attempting. He could not concentrate on anything but the sight of Thor across the table from him.

Once the meal was over, Thor and Loki both took their leave, pretending to go their separate ways, only to meet in a dark hallway corner outside the dining hall.

Loki pulled Thor into a tight hug, not daring to kiss him here. “Will you stay the night with me?” Loki asked quietly.

“I have a better idea,” Thor replied. “Would you stay with me in *my* chambers?”

Loki’s room, where they had spent several nights together already, was what used to be their shared sleeping area. It was familiar to have Thor there. Venturing to Thor’s room, however, which Loki had never seen the inside of, was a thrilling idea.

“Sounds lovely,” he said. “Give me a moment to go get some sleeping clothes from my room, and I will—”

“Don’t bother.” Thor grinned. “I have something that should fit you.”

Loki grimaced. “I don’t want to wear something that has the stench of your sweat all over it.”

“They’re *clean*, Brother. Come on, let’s not waste any more time.”

Thor led him to a corridor Loki rarely had cause to go to. The doors to his chambers looked nearly exactly the same as Loki’s, perhaps the slightest bit bigger. The inside, however, was clearly larger.

There were nothing but windows lining the back wall, and a small balcony that oversaw the brightest parts of the city. Thor’s bed, a magnificent four-poster affair, stood off to the left side of the room, all the curtains pulled back. Loki doubted that Thor had ever lowered them. Strewn over the backs of chairs and in piles on the floor were Thor’s clothes and boots. A pile of books covered the surface of Thor’s desk, several of them open to different pages.

“Seems about right,” Loki said, poking at a dirty pile of laundry with his shoe. “As much as I have missed you, I don’t think I would ever want to share a room with you again.”

Thor laughed as he picked up some shoes and tossed them to the side. “You act as though you were the perfect roommate all those years ago.”

“I kept my side of the room clean. I did nothing wrong.”

“Oh really? I seem to recall you throwing an absolute tantrum any time something of mine even *slightly* crossed the imaginary line down the middle of our room. You threw my shoe at my face that one time.”

Loki shrugged and tossed his head back. “I’m sure I recall no such thing.”

“Surprising no one.” Thor went to his wardrobe, which sat against the right wall, and pulled out a few of his usual sleeping clothes. “You can come pick something out that you like. I am going to go change.”

Loki walked over and pawed through some of the drawers. “I can’t believe you wouldn’t let me get something of my own. You will be a cruel king.”

“That, or I just wanted to see you wear something of mine.” Thor grinned and pressed a kiss to Loki’s temple. “I will be right back. Let me know when I can come back in.”

Thor walked off to the adjoining room—his private baths—and Loki was left to sort through the rest of Thor’s things. He was certain that all of this would be just slightly too big for him—a fact he was sure that Thor was aware of. In the end, he found a black tunic that seemed acceptable.

As he pulled off his shoes and hiked his own shirt over his head, Loki wondered if he should wear just the tunic. Surely it was long enough to cover all that needed to be covered. Was that what Thor wanted?

Loki gazed warily at the door Thor had disappeared through. He slipped the tunic on, finding it to be a rather nice fit after all. The hem reached to just above his knees. Maybe he should just keep his own trousers on? Although these were terrible to sleep in, and not exactly his most comfortable pair. He sifted through the drawer once again and grabbed the first pair of pants he saw. Hastily, as though Thor might walk in at any minute, he switched his own pants for the new pair.

Just then, Thor knocked from the other side of his door. “May I come back in?”

“Yes,” Loki called, folding his clothes and setting them on a chair. “I am ready.”

Thor reentered the room and eagerly looked Loki up and down. Loki scowled and looked away, knowing for a fact that he was blushing.

“They look good on you, Brother!” he declared. “They almost fit.”

Loki scoffed. “‘Almost’. Please. Try not to flatter me.”

“But I like it! I mean...you wearing *my* clothes, it’s kind of...attractive, in a way.”

Loki found himself growing increasingly uncomfortable with the look of pure affection Thor was giving him, and turned away towards the window. “It’s quite a nice view you have here,” he said, crossing his arms. “Shame about the storm, there’s not much to see.”

“Maybe not,” Thor agreed. “But I like being able to see the rain outside my window and hear the thunder. It’s soothing.”

Loki smiled. “It is.”

There was silence for a moment between them, nothing but the soft sounds of thunder and rain battering against the window glass. Loki heard Thor move closer behind him and turned to meet his eyes.

“Loki,” Thor said, brushing a bit of hair behind his ear, “I want to clarify something with you.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Oh? Go on.”

“When earlier today, you spoke of wanting to ‘see me’...you were speaking of a deeper intimacy, correct?”

“Yes. And?”

“I want you to understand that I did not decline because of any lack of desire for the same thing. I want it too, more badly than I can say.”

Loki could not hide his flattered grin, and simply nodded.

“But I am inexperienced in these things. I don’t wish to simply....” Thor gesticulated aimlessly in the air before him. “You know, fumble all over you not knowing what I am doing. I want to get it right. So I suggest that we...work our way up to it.”

Loki cocked an eyebrow. “Work our way up?”

“Yes. Which is why I invited you to my room—to my bed—tonight.” He paused, searching Loki’s face for a reaction. “I will do nothing that you do not want me to,” he continued. “We do not even have to do anything at all, if you don’t want.”

Loki pondered that, looking out at the raindrops on the window. Eventually, he nodded. “That sounds nice.”

He felt Thor take his hand and pull him gently. “Then...shall we?”

Loki let Thor lead him over to the bed, which was looking more and more inviting as the steady drone of the raindrops began to take its toll. Thor pulled back the covers and let Loki crawl in first; immediately, the sensation of soft sheets and blankets overtook Loki and he relaxed, tension that he hadn’t even realized he was holding draining out of him. He laid his head back on the pillow, sighing with relief. He heard Thor’s footsteps walk away for a minute, and then the room darkened. He felt the mattress dip when Thor came back to snuggle under the blanket beside him.

They were facing the window, a perfect view of the city and the storm.

“Your bed is nicer than mine,” Loki pouted, snuggling deeper into the soft down duvet.

“Well, it is now,” Thor replied, inching closer and pulling Loki close to him. He took in a deep breath and sighed. “Your hair smells nice. Like soap.”

“I did take a bath.” Loki let his eyes fall closed. The distant noise of thunder, the cool blankets, and Thor’s body heat all washed over him at once. He could not recall a moment in the past several years that he had felt so at peace.

He snuggled in closer to his brother, breathing in Thor’s scent. It was a musky smell, not entirely pleasant, but one so familiar he would know it for the rest of his life. He felt Thor press a kiss to his forehead, and then Thor’s strong fingers brushing his hair away from his cheek.

“Are you so tired already, Brother?” Thor asked with a hint of disappointment.

“Just a little,” Loki mumbled. He forced his eyes open and saw Thor staring back at him. “I don’t want to fall asleep just yet, though....” The sooner he slept, the sooner morning would come. And the sooner he would have to leave.

He licked his lips, just a little, and moved forward for a kiss. Thor put his hand on the back of Loki’s head and drew him in closer. Loki was becoming more accustomed to Thor’s mouth, the way it fit against his and the size and feel of his tongue. He loved the way Thor breathed into him, loved the roughness of Thor’s stubble against his own smooth skin. He loved the way he could feel Thor’s fingers curling in his hair, his fingertips pressing down against his skull with a firm, gentle possessiveness.

There was a rough, sudden motion and Loki found himself on his back, Thor kneeling above him. For an instant his heart stopped—Thor hadn’t forgotten his promise already, had he?

“It’s all right,” Thor said, having seen the flash of concern in Loki’s eyes. “I just...is this okay?”

Loki nodded wordlessly, his heartbeat calming. He took in a deep breath. It would all be well. Thor would not hurt him, not even if Loki himself asked for it.

“You tell me if it’s not.”

“Have you ever known me to not be forthcoming about my opinion?”

Thor grinned, his confidence restored. “All right.” He leaned down, his hands on either side of Loki’s head, and reclaimed his place on Loki’s lips.

Even though a moment ago the new position had been disconcerting, Loki found himself growing used to it quickly. In fact, he was growing to love it. Being trapped between Thor’s arms, under Thor’s chest, completely at the mercy of his older brother and all his strength. Thor could have held him down, flipped him over, ripped all his clothes away, and taken whatever he wanted. But he did not. It thrilled him; Loki’s heart beat faster and faster, adrenaline blurring his vision. Thor’s capacity for restraint was greater than Loki had thought possible, and it only made him love his brother all the more.

“Loki...” Thor murmured lowly as he moved from lips to neck. This time, he bit down with true force, and Loki yelped.

Thor’s head jerked up. “Are you okay? I’m sorry!”

“I’m *fine*, calm yourself,” Loki laughed. “It just surprised me, is all.”

Thor did not look convinced.

“It was fine, Brother. I liked it. Do it again.”

“I wasn’t thinking. It will leave bruises.”

“And I will deal with them later.” It was partly a lie. Loki wanted to keep proof of this night for as long as he could.

Thor nodded and moved back in, nipping and sucking at Loki’s neck with slow, deliberate precision. Loki grabbed onto the back of Thor’s head, catching his fingers in his brother’s blonde hair, holding him close. He wanted marks and bruises everywhere. He wanted to look at himself tomorrow and see physical *proof* that Thor truly loved him. A mark that nobody could deny or take from him.

A new heat found its way to Loki’s abdomen, and he lifted his hips up almost out of pure instinct. They brushed lightly against Thor’s own hips, and Loki whined in frustration.

“Thor,” he said, feeling slightly winded, “would you—?”

He didn’t even have to finish the question; Thor immediately knew what he wanted and dropped down to lay directly on top of Loki. Loki bucked up against the solid weight of his brother; the sensation of Thor’s entire body on top of him was intoxicating. He could not move even an inch, he was completely and utterly trapped. Surrounded. Owned.

His hips twitched and rolled with what little space he was afforded. He could feel Thor doing the same, driving his pelvis down into Loki. Loki was not unfamiliar with this sensation; like everybody else in all the Nine Realms, he had taken himself in hand before. He had never imagined being in Thor’s bed like this, with Thor on top of him, owning him, biting him...he was growing short of breath just thinking of it.

“Brother...” Loki whimpered, lacing his fingers tighter into Thor’s hair.

“What is it?” Thor asked, breaking away from his neck for an instant. “What do you need?”

Loki did not know, only that he needed it now. He pushed up against Thor’s hips with more force, his legs shaking. He was struck with a sudden, foolish thought: that Thor would never allow him in his bed again, that all of this was a mistake that Thor would regret in the morning and never want to see Loki again. For a fleeting instant he wished that Thor would just do it, wished that he would pin Loki down and take what he wanted. At least then Loki could believe that Thor found him desirable, that Thor truly loved him the way he said.

How could it be, though? One day there would be no place in this bed for him. Another—a woman—would take his place. Thor would have *her* body, *she* would be the one warming the sheets and giving him enough pleasure to make him scream. And Thor would love her, in a way that was good and honorable and worthy. His love for Loki could never be any of those things.

“Loki?” Thor asked again, going back up on his knees, lifting himself off Loki’s body. “Do you want to stop?”

“No,” he replied miserably. “Don’t stop.”

“But you seem upset.”

“I am upset. I still don’t want you to stop.”

“About what?” Thor frowned, searching Loki’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to *talk* about it, Thor, I just want to keep going.”

Thor studied him a bit longer, then leaned in for another kiss. “Loki, please trust me. I love you, do you understand? From now on, my bed is your bed, and you will always be welcome here. I *want* you here, I *want* you with me. Don’t worry about anything else but what you want right now.”

Loki took in a deep breath and exhaled. Then he nodded, and breathed out again. It was all right. He was panicking over nothing. He had to remember all that Thor had done and said and promised...had to remember the gift from earlier today, how he had stayed during his estrous cycle, and how he was risking everything for him right this moment. Loki reached out, placing both hands on either side of Thor’s face, and pulled him down for another kiss. Thor dropped his body gently on top of Loki again.

Thor’s solid, rock-hard weight was driving Loki crazy in the best way. He bucked up his hips again, taking in deep breaths through his nose. Thor drove his hips down to meet Loki’s, low, soft grunts rising up from deep within his throat.

Thor broke away just long enough to say his brother’s name, and then his tongue was right back where it was meant to be. Loki heard the mattress springs creak just the slightest as Thor rutted into him again. A growing stiffness was hitting him just between the legs, coming alive and growing hard for him. For *him*. For Loki.

There was a moment of fear as he thought of Thor penetrating him. He would not do it tonight—that they had agreed on—but one day...perhaps even one day soon. Would Loki enjoy it? Would it be horrible? Would Thor ignore him if it hurt, would he thrust in harder and harder, deaf to anything but the pursuit of his own pleasure? Would he take Loki in his woman’s parts, or would they disgust him? Would Thor force Loki to take it from behind, without even asking?

What had seemed so sweet earlier was swirling into a maelstrom of uncertainty and fear. Maybe Loki was not ready either. Maybe this was all that they could do for now.

“Loki...” Thor groaned again into his ear. “Loki, my brother, my sweet little brother....” He sounded like a man in a trance, completely lost and helpless.

Loki wrapped his arms around Thor, rubbing his palms up and down his brother’s back muscles. They were straining, all of them tensed to their limit. Loki moved his hand down Thor’s side, down to the small of his back, and experimentally pushed his fingertips under the waistband of Thor’s pants. Thor took in a sharp intake of breath, and Loki pushed his hand in further, eventually moving his palm over the curve of Thor’s ass.

Thor gasped again and pulled away, staring Loki straight in the eyes. Thor’s eyes were so bright Loki could easily imagine them glowing in the dark.

“I’m...I’m sorry, is this okay?” Loki asked sheepishly, drawing his hand back.

"Yes," Thor said, his breath shaking. "It's...nice."

Thor went in for Loki’s neck, and Loki reached both hands under the cloth of Thor’s pants. He squeezed gently, eliciting a tiny moan from Thor which spread throughout Loki’s skin. Thor groaned and hummed with each miniscule touch, biting down harder on Loki’s neck each time.

“I love you,” Thor said, pressing kisses to the stinging bruises, “I love you....”

Loki had no response for that but a pathetic whimper. Thor’s actions were gradually slowing, his thrusts growing softer and less forceful, his kisses lingering longer and his fingers running through Loki’s hair in long strokes. Though he did not say so, Loki got the distinct impression that Thor was deliberately reeling himself in, determined as he was to keep his promise of going slow. Loki found that he did not mind it so much. He eased his grip on Thor’s ass and settled for rubbing his smooth, muscled skin with his palms.

Eventually, the rhythmic motions of Thor above him became soothing in their softness. Loki felt a warmth and fatigue begin to overtake him, and he slowly worked his hands out of Thor’s pants. He laid there, fully content, letting Thor’s gentle hands and kisses lull him gradually to sleep.

“Loki,” Thor said, speaking his name like a prayer, “my sweet brother....”

Words failed Loki. They continued to fail him for the rest of the night.

Chapter 6

Loki awoke in the same position he'd fallen asleep: his head on Thor's chest, one arm draped over his stomach. For the faintest instant there was confusion, but then he remembered why he was here, and a wide smile spread across his face. He'd spent the night with Thor. In Thor's bed. Wearing Thor's clothes, no less.

Thor, who was still asleep, was blazing with body heat as usual. Loki did not mind, and curled up closer, closing his eyes to doze a few more minutes. Thor's heartbeat was slow and steady, his breaths deep and even.

Loki drifted back off to sleep for a short moment until he felt Thor's breathing change, and he shifted, stretching his arms over his head. Thor exhaled, turned his head, and opened his eyes.

"Good morning," he said sleepily.

"Good morning yourself," Loki replied.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Of course."

Thor smiled, his face still hazy with sleep, and said, "Good." He reached out, brushing a bit of hair away from Loki's eyes, and pulled him close for a kiss. "Thank you for staying with me."

"Not a problem."

Thor's smile grew wider, and he rolled over to pull Loki into a full hug. "I wish I could just keep you here," he murmured against his ear. "So that every night I could have you all to myself."

"I doubt Mother and Father would approve of that."

"I know."

The hug lasted a few more seconds before Thor finally released him. "Can I add one more stipulation to our bargain?"

"Oh?" Loki raised an eyebrow and lifted himself up on one elbow. "And what more would you demand of me?"

"On our day together, would you spend the night with me as well?"

Loki looked towards the ceiling, pretending to consider it. "I suppose I could manage that." He paused. "I will ask for one thing in return as part of this new stipulation."

"And that is?"

He tugged on the front of his shirt. "I want to keep these."

Thor stared for a moment, and then laughed. "Is that all? Of course you can keep them, Loki."

"Excellent." Loki sat up straight and stretched his arms out in front of him. "I suppose I should be making my way back to my room."

“Oh...you’re right. How are you going to do that?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “You really didn’t think this through, did you? Lucky for you I have enough magic skill to get back to my chambers undetected.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Thor. Don’t worry about me.” Loki leaned down to give Thor one last kiss and crawled over him out of bed. “I will see you in a month.”

Thor had expected the next month to crawl by torturously. How was he supposed to get through thirty entire days of not being with Loki, not having him all to himself, not being able to touch him? Still, he was determined to do it. After all, if he could endure this trial, it would make their next night together all the sweeter, wouldn’t it?

He did not regret his decision to wait with Loki. He had enough friends who had already bedded their first man or woman, and across the board the experience seemed to be awkward. If Thor messed this up with Loki, he knew—he *knew*—that he would not get a second chance.

And besides, it was what Loki deserved.

Thor could still pin down the exact moment he fell in love with his brother, that day by the river. He couldn’t even truly say he was surprised. He had always adored Loki, from the day Frigga first let him see the weird bundle in her arms. How could he not? Thor took his position as a big brother with pride. He had a person to protect, a person to love and cherish and help, and he took that responsibility quite seriously.

Besides all that, Loki was perfect in nearly every way. He was beautiful, for one thing. He was smart, clever, cunning in a way that one simply could not learn. His magic was growing better and better every day. Frigga had tried to teach Thor a few tricks when he was younger, but it had proven so difficult he despaired of ever trying again. Yet Loki did it so effortlessly.

Most people would sing Thor’s praises at every turn. They were expected to, of course, he was the firstborn prince. And yet to pull even one favorable word from Loki took ten times the effort. Loki’s kind words, so hard-won and so rare, were more precious to Thor than the whole of Asgard cheering for him. He never let Thor think too highly of himself. He kept Thor grounded, kept him aiming higher but steered him clear of the sun. Thor would not be half the person he was now if not for his brother.

About halfway through the month, Thor was beginning to crack. He only saw Loki at meals and occasionally in the halls, but it was not enough. It was not nearly enough. He could not risk anything brazen in the presence of their parents, who he worried were beginning to suspect something odd. He stopped Loki in the corridor one day and pulled him in for the smallest, quickest kiss he could manage before continuing along his way. The next day, he sent a servant out to buy a box of Loki’s favorite chocolates from the city and left them in Loki’s room. The day after, he asked the gardener to bring him one of the yellow lilies, saying it was for Frigga. Instead, Thor had left that too in Loki’s room.

The day after that, it was Thor who found himself pushed up against a wall in a deserted area of the palace, Loki’s lips pressed fiercely on his own.

“Are you trying to drive me mad?” Loki whispered.

“Only to even the playing field,” Thor replied with a grin.

Loki’s eyes darted up and down the hallway. “I know you have an issue with patience, but let’s not get reckless. Need I remind you of what would happen if—?”

“Nothing will happen,” Thor interrupted. “I promise.”

Distant footsteps sounded from one end of the hall. Thor and Loki immediately went in two separate directions, as if they had never crossed paths at all.

Thor resisted any more bold gifts and gestures until a few days before their agreed upon date. He had cornered Loki in the hallway again after dinner, showering kisses all over his face. He just barely heard Loki’s warning in time that somebody was coming. It had been an extremely close call, one that reminded Thor that he was supposed to be keeping all this a secret as best he could.

But finally the day came. Thor had confirmed with Frigga earlier that there would no more surprise visits from his suitors. He was going to have Loki all to himself, all day and all night.

The day was a bit cold as Thor headed down to the gardens to meet Loki. It wasn’t unexpected, as winter was approaching in full force. As the weather turned colder, they would have to find new ways to spend their day together, but for now it was still acceptable to go to the river. If it got to be much worse, they would go up the river and find another cave to huddle in, or simply head home.

Thor found Loki in his usual spot, under his favorite tree. He looked more pensive than usual as Thor approached.

“Good morning, Brother!” Thor greeted him, his heart swelling with excitement. “Are you ready to get going?”

“I suppose,” Loki sighed as he got to his feet. Thor pulled him in for a quick peck on the cheek.

“Brother, *stop* that,” Loki protested, stepping away. “I swear, you are far too careless.”

“I’m sorry,” Thor replied, putting one arm around Loki’s shoulders as they went off towards the stables. “It has just been so long since I had you all to myself.”

“It has been the same amount of time that it’s always been. And if you want this to continue, you’d do well to remember that this is all very, *very* wrong.”

“How can it be wrong when I love you more than all the stars in the sky?”

“What does that even *mean*, Thor.” Loki rolled his eyes. “You are the absolute worst at courtship, I swear.”

“Lies and more lies, my brother. I am the best. *You*, on the other hand, are the worst at receiving compliments. I have to pay you twenty in the hopes that you will accept even one.”

“If you ever said anything coherent, I would probably be more receptive.”

Thor grinned and resisted the fierce urge to kiss Loki again. He resisted all the way until they had ridden their horses out of sight of the palace, at which point he brought his steed up beside Loki’s and placed a kiss on his cheek.

“You are even more affectionate than usual today, Thor,” Loki remarked, grinning wide. “Are you

trying to flatter me for some reason?”

“No. I just want everything to be perfect.”

“That is not something one can control.”

“We’ll see about that.”

By the time they arrived at the river, the sun had come out, staving off the worst of the day’s chill. Thor had packed them a small lunch, including an overabundance of Loki’s favorite cake. “To make up for all the ones I stole,” he had explained. Loki had rolled his eyes but refused to share even a bite.

“This will probably be the last month we are able to come out here,” Loki said wistfully, licking the icing from his fingers as he stared out at the river.

“Yes,” Thor agreed. “The weather will take a colder turn any day now.”

Loki glanced at him out of the corner of his eye but said nothing further on the subject.

“I’m certain we can find other things to do,” Thor continued. “There are always other realms to travel to. And plenty of things to do in the city.”

“I would rather not,” Loki said, glancing down at his hands. There was an unsightly chip in the nail polish he’d applied a few days ago; he would have to tend to that. Or just remove everything entirely. He couldn’t be bothered to fix every little mistake all the time. He grimaced and began to pick at the color with his thumbnail.

“There’s no need to worry about it so soon. We will figure something out,” said Thor.

“Mm-hmm.”

Thor narrowed his eyes and moved a bit closer. “Is everything all right, Loki?”

“Yes, Brother, everything is fine.” He had chipped off all of the polish from this nail. Now everything was uneven and his hands were even uglier than usual.

Loki hated his hands. They were bony and the skin on the back of them was loose, like a crone’s. They looked so tiny and weak, like the bones could snap at any instant. Woman’s hands. Magician’s hands. Not like Thor’s, not like Odin’s. Loki could not hold a weapon any larger than a dagger with any real finesse.

As if to drive the insult further, Thor placed his hand on top of Loki’s at just that instant. Loki smiled in spite of himself. His brother’s hands were so warm, so strong, his callouses an intoxicating roughness against the smoothness of Loki’s own palm.

“Something is distracting you,” Thor declared, gently squeezing Loki’s hand. “Will you not tell me what it is?”

“I will not.” Loki shook his head. “I will not because I know you, and you will react poorly.”

“What?”

“No! You wanted the day to be perfect, and my telling you what is on my mind will make it distinctly imperfect.”

“Loki, enough games. Tell me what is troubling you, Brother. Please?”

Loki finally looked up. Thor’s face was a bit closer to Loki’s own than he’d first realized, and he smiled to see the deep, churning concern in his brother’s eyes. Loki wanted to believe that Thor would fulfill every promise that he’d ever made, that he would tear down the World Tree itself if it would make Loki happy. That he would come running to rescue Loki from any danger he was in, even if that danger was of Loki’s own making.

Loki already believed it, though he truly, truly wished that he did not.

“Thor,” he said, as earnestly as he could possibly muster. “Please, can I just tell you later?” He paused a moment. “Please?”

Thor was silent as he watched his brother’s face, perhaps searching for some glimpse into Loki’s inner thoughts. Loki knew it was not in Thor’s nature to stand idly by while something that needed fixing went unattended. He could manage it, of course—Thor could manage just about anything—but not without a great deal of pouting.

Eventually, Thor’s muscles went slack as he released the tension in them. “Okay,” he said, leaning forward to place a kiss on Loki’s forehead. “I will not ask again.”

“Thank you, Brother.”

The rest of the day was spent in relative relaxation. Loki showed Thor how to skip stones across the water, a talent Thor picked up within three tries. By then, he was throwing stones nearly twice the distance that Loki could manage.

“You are cheating!” Loki exclaimed, searching desperately for another flattened stone amongst the bank.

“I am not!” Thor replied with a laugh. “It is as you told me, in the wrist.”

Loki shoved him aside and stood in front of the river, lining up his next shot. “I don’t need you to lecture me, *I* was the one who taught you this not ten minutes ago.”

“It seems the student has surpassed the teacher in record time, then.”

Just as Loki was about to send his next rock flying, Thor dove into him from the side, knocking him off his feet.

“*THOR!*”

“That one didn’t even skip once, Loki,” Thor laughed, pinning Loki to the ground.

“You are such a cheater!” Loki wriggled from underneath his brother’s weight, but it was no use.

“Once again, I learned from the best.”

Loki grimaced. “You are insufferable and I hate you.”

Thor twisted around to better reach Loki’s lips, hovering over his brother’s face with a cocky grin. “That is the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I can get absolutely sappy if you like.”

Thor kissed Loki then, lingering until he could feel his brother’s lips raise up in a smile.

“I know our day has just started,” Thor said, pulling away for a moment, “but I already cannot wait to take you to bed tonight.”

“Oh?” Loki asked as Thor kissed his cheek again. “Do you have something special planned?”

“Perhaps. That is, only if you are up for it.”

“I promise, I will be.”

After supper, Loki gathered up his sleeping clothes—the ones he had taken from Thor—and eagerly made his way through the halls to his brother’s room. Luckily there was nobody around to see him, and he slipped into Thor’s chambers quite easily.

“Loki, is that you?” Thor called from the adjacent room.

“Yes, it’s me,” Loki replied, setting his clothes down. “You oughtn’t to say that out loud, you know. What if it hadn’t been me? You’d have to explain why you were expecting me.”

“Ah, you’re right. I’m sorry!”

“I’m going to go ahead and change.”

“No wait!” came Thor’s voice. Loki heard the sloshing of water from the bath in the next room.

“Not yet, Brother! Give me just a minute.”

Loki felt a slight twinge of fear but quickly swallowed it down. “What are you doing?” he asked, if just for something to say.

“Just cleaning up a little. I am almost finished!”

Loki sighed and wandered over to Thor’s desk. It was in exactly the same disarray as when he had come here last. Books were thrown everywhere, most of them opened, as if Thor had no patience to read only one thing at a time.

Looking closer now, however, Loki could see what the books had in common. They were all history books on Jotunheim, including several that Loki had already finished reading months before. Some were ones he hadn’t ever seen; Thor must have gotten them from libraries other than the palace’s. He hadn’t realized the lengths to which Thor had gone to study more about Frost Giants. He was surprised that Thor had even managed to sit down and actually read a book for more than a few minutes.

Loki reached up to touch the side of his head, thinking he should have brought his emerald with him to Thor’s room tonight. It was a special occasion, was it not? He wondered if he could make it back to his room before Thor finished his bath, but just at that moment, the door to the adjoining room was thrown open.

“All right!” Thor announced, striding into the room, his damp hair pulled back into a tail. He wore nothing but a towel around his waist.

“Thor!” Loki exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

He only laughed. “What, does this bother you? This is my surprise, Loki.”

Loki frowned, trying to will away the blush rising to his cheeks and hide how very, *very* interested

he was in what lay beneath the towel. “A bath towel,” he said dryly. “How thoughtful of you.”

“No, Loki.” Thor walked forward and took hold of Loki’s hand, then gently led him over to the bed. “Just...have a seat.”

Loki plopped down and crossed his arms over his chest. He raised an eyebrow. “Am I going to get a show?”

“Always.” Thor grinned. “But let us talk seriously. I have had a lot of time to think since our last night together. I intend to keep my promise to go slowly with you. And tonight...I am willing to give a little bit more.”

Loki swallowed. “Oh?”

“Yes. And...while I would love to see you as well...I will not force you if you do not want.”

“...I see.” Loki nodded. “That sounds fair.” He glanced down at his hands, his grip tightening on his arms. He had forgotten to remove the chipped nail polish from earlier.

“All right,” said Thor. Loki looked up and saw him coming closer, stopping just at arm’s length away. “Go ahead.” Thor gestured vaguely towards the towel.

“Wh—you want *me* to...?”

Thor nodded. “Yes, go on.”

Loki looked up and glared. “This better not be some sort of trick.”

“I promise, it’s not!”

“...Very well.”

Loki lifted his hands and placed his fingers beneath the edge of the towel. He was keenly aware of how fresh Thor’s skin looked, just washed and out of the bath. His brother was radiating heat, warming Loki’s hands from the fingertips. Loki untucked the outer edge of the towel and slowly pulled it away, trying in vain to slow his heartbeat as he took in the sight of his brother.

Thor was well-endowed, there had never been any question of that. And his muscles, they were far more impressive now than Loki had ever realized. His muscles were frequently visible through his clothes; the more Thor trained, the less his clothes fit. The tailors had never really been able to keep up. And yet Loki had never realized how perfectly scaled Thor’s entire body was. It was clear that as he grew older, he would outgrow Loki by leaps and bounds. He would grow to be *enormous*, for certain.

“Well?” Thor asked, fidgeting his hands. “Say something.”

“I...don’t know what to say.” Loki couldn’t even move his eyes away. Thor hung flaccid now, and Loki was overcome with the desire to touch it, feel it in his hands, and make Thor grow hard and wanting. He would probably even grow to twice that size.

“Brother,” Thor laughed softly. “I didn’t know faces could turn quite that shade of red.”

“Shut up,” Loki snapped back instinctively. “I am just...I suppose I would be lying if I said I was not impressed.”

“And we wouldn’t want you to lie, now would we?”

Loki scowled. “Was it your intent to just make fun of me all night?”

“No, no, Brother, I apologize.” Thor reached forward and took Loki’s hand, placing a kiss on his fingers. Loki huffed, but his expression softened.

There was a tense silence before Loki spoke again, his voice barely above a whisper: “Would you come closer?”

Thor took a step forward. Loki reached out one hand and let his fingertips ghost over Thor’s abs. His chest looked so hard and strong, how had Loki never noticed before? It was a strength Loki knew he would never achieve. His body was not made for the same amount of sheer force that Thor’s could wield. Once again Loki was overcome with the desire to have Thor’s body on top of him, just to feel all that weight, all that power and heaviness.

Loki swallowed tightly, moving his fingers down from Thor’s stomach to his hips, tracing the furrow that led down between his legs. He paused, recalling all the times they had swam and bathed together as children, how none of it had seemed anything but innocent at the time. Why then should he feel shame now? It was all the same.

Then again, Loki had never, not even when he found pleasure in his own hand, had such thoughts about lying with a man. He had imagined women, because that was the “proper” way of things, was it not? Or at least, he had tried. He found that anatomy, by itself, was not arousing. And yet the way that Thor stood before him, his whole self on display, allowing Loki access to everything: that was a different sensation entirely.

“All right, I will say it,” Loki said, drawing his hand back. “You are in possession of the most captivating body in all the Nine Realms.”

Thor laughed heartily. “Why thank you, Brother! Though I wish I could disagree, if I were a little more informed on the subject.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “What in the hell are you talking about?”

“Ah, well...” Thor muttered, averting his eyes momentarily. “I was hoping that perhaps you let me see you as well.”

“Absolutely not.” The words were out before Loki could truly give it any thought. He shook his head fiercely. “There is nothing to see.”

The disappointment on Thor’s face could not be plainer. Yet, he smiled through it. “All right then. That’s perfectly fine, Loki.”

“Is that why you asked me not to change my clothes just yet?”

Thor blushed a bit as he nodded. “I suppose it was a bold thing to ask.”

Loki hated how Thor’s clear discontent was making him feel *guilty*. He wished he could honor Thor’s wish, he truly did.

“I just...” he forced himself to say, “don’t think there is anything you are missing out on. Especially compared to you.”

Thor shrugged. “Ah, well. I can only hope that one day you will allow me the pleasure.” He bent down and kissed Loki on the cheek.

Loki felt a rush of humiliation and guilt. He was so selfish, denying Thor something as trivial as a peek. Yet Thor continued to love him, and did not shame him for it. A twisted fear that this entire thing—whatever it was—was in fact a sham curled up into his heart, but he stamped it out as best he could.

He got to his feet. “I’m going to go change,” he announced. “I’ll be right back.”

“Certainly.” Thor smiled as if he had forgotten the whole thing already.

Loki gathered up his sleeping clothes and went into Thor’s private bath chamber. As he lifted his shirt over his head, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and grimaced. He had done Thor a *favor*; one look at his lanky, pale chest would kill any desire Thor had ever held for him. And it would never get any better. Loki had never been able to build muscle like Thor had. He had never been able to keep up with him in anything, least of all physical endeavors. Frost Giants—the *real* ones, not runts like him—were called giants for a reason. They were huge, powerful, unyielding and solid as the hardest ice. And yet Loki had not gotten an ounce of that. All he had was his weakling’s body, weak woman’s magic, and no place in Asgard or Jotunheim.

He yanked the black tunic over his head to rid himself of the sight of his body. He sniffled, feeling those damned tears rising to his eyes, and wished he could throttle himself for being so feeble and pathetic. He dropped his trousers and quickly pulled on Thor’s pair that he had claimed for himself. After their first night together, Loki had slept in these at least once a week. Thor’s scent, which had hung close to the fabric, was beginning to fade, replaced with his own musk.

Loki felt the tears beginning to fall and grit his teeth in frustration. He still had yet to tell Thor the news he’d learned just a week prior, the thing he’d avoided telling him earlier that day. He should just blurt it out without preamble, ruin the entire evening and sour both their moods. He would not be able to keep this anyway; he may as well destroy what he could so it could never come back to hurt him.

He wiped his eyes and took a few deep breaths. Hopefully Thor had already turned off the lights out there, otherwise his puffy eyes would be plainly obvious.

When he reentered the main room, he found the lights dimmed, just as he’d hoped. He padded over to Thor’s bed, where his brother was already under the covers, and snuggled in beside him. Before he could convince himself not to, Loki pulled Thor into a deep, tight hug, then silenced whatever Thor had been about to say with a kiss.

When they broke apart, Thor studied Loki’s face closely. “Are you all right?” he asked. “I feel like I upset you.”

Loki shook his head. “It’s all right. I’m fine.”

Thor only narrowed his eyes, struggling to see in the dim light. “Were you crying?”

“No, Thor.” The question admittedly produced a kneejerk reaction in him. Thor and his friends, when they were much younger, had always accused Loki of being a crybaby, harassing him to the point where he did break down into tears. The bitter memory brought a sneer to his face. “Why are you always on about that? I don’t cry every hour of every day, despite what you may think.”

It only served to confuse Thor further. “What?” he asked. “I don’t think that about you.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Thor.”

“Something is troubling you. It has been troubling you all day.”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” Loki exclaimed, sitting up abruptly. He was gripped with the urge to do something rash and hurtful, and he threw the blankets off and got to his feet.

“I’m leaving,” he announced.

“Loki!” Thor shouted, jumping out of bed—he had gotten dressed again—and grabbing Loki by the upper arm.

“What is *wrong* with you!?” Loki exclaimed, yanking his arm away. “Why are you always *grabbing* me like that?!”

“I’m sorry!” Thor put his hands up defensively, his expression hurt and confused like a small animal. “I’m sorry, Loki. I didn’t mean to.”

“I’m leaving,” Loki repeated. “This is a mistake and you know it.”

“Loki, please. *Please*,” begged Thor, putting himself between Loki and the door. He reached out but did not put his hands on his brother. “Please tell me what’s wrong. Was it something I did? I’m sorry for everything! For all of it! For everything I ever said or did to you, Loki, I’m truly, *truly* sorry!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Loki spat back, more to convince himself than Thor. “It doesn’t matter.” He felt the tears coming again and he wished to tear his own eyes out if just to make their constant betrayal stop.

“We can’t do this, we can’t...” Loki said, looking to the floor so he would not have to bear the look of distress on Thor’s face.

“We *can*,” Thor told him. “We *can*, it’s all right, Loki, I promise that it will always be all right!”

“You can’t promise anything! You’re not the king, you’re not Father, and you cannot rewrite existence to make me a proper Aesir or your true brother!”

There was a heavy silence for a while in the darkened room. Loki did not tear his eyes from the ground, fighting with every ounce of his self-control to keep from crying. Thor did not move, he did not reach out and try to touch him, and for the longest time, he said nothing.

When he did speak again, his voice was even, gentle, and full of nothing but affection.

“Brother, please tell me what has happened. I swear that I will not be angry, no matter what it is.”

Loki believed him. Embittered creature that he was, he believed him.

He swallowed hard, but still would not look up from the floor. “Last week...Father came to see me while I was having my lessons with Mother. He said that it was time to send the ambassadors to the realms we are allied with, just as he does every few years, to discuss trade relations and other such stupid things...but this time he was sending them to Jotunheim as well.” He paused. “He said I was going to go with them. So I could observe them, and learn, and grow in my duties to the realm.”

Loki lifted his eyes to look Thor in the face. “He said that it was time we began to repair the damage with Jotunheim...and that you had encouraged him to do so.”

Thor’s face was completely unreadable. “When are you set to leave?”

“At the end of the month.”

“And when will you return?”

“...I don't know. It could be months. Or an entire year, at the longest.”

Thor nodded. “I will go with you.”

Loki scoffed but could not keep from laughing. Of course Thor would say something like that. “You can't. Asgard needs you here. Do you honestly think Father would send both of us away at once?”

“To be a king I must learn all that I can. This is as much my responsibility as it is anyone else's. Besides, I could not bear it if you were away for so long.”

“Father won't allow it,” Loki repeated. “I promise, if you ask him, you will only be disappointed.”

“I will *ask* him nothing.” Thor took a tentative step forward and put his hand on Loki's face. “I will not be separated from you. I will *not*.”

Loki allowed himself a tiny smile. “You must have slept through the lesson that says a king does not always get his way. A king does what's best for his people. Not what's best for himself.”

“This *is* the best for my people,” Thor insisted. “Because when I am apart from you I want to burn all of Asgard to the ground in my grief.”

Loki could not resist laughing at that. Thor's expression softened and he leaned forward for a kiss. Loki allowed it. He loved the way Thor's fingers softly kneaded into the base of his skull whenever he touched his face.

The kiss ended and Thor rested his forehead against Loki's. “You give in so easily to despair,” he said gently. “All you ever need to do is ask me, and I will make sure everything is all right.”

Loki believed him. Perhaps it made him a fool. Well, then, he would be the most naïve fool in all the Nine Realms.

“I'm sorry,” Loki said meekly.

“You have nothing at all to apologize for, my love.”

“Am I still allowed to stay?” he asked. He knew the answer, of course. But he still wanted to hear Thor say it.

“Of course.” Thor took Loki's hand and kissed his fingers. Before Loki even realized it, Thor swept him up into his arms, carrying him like a bride back over to the bed.

“Pardon you,” Loki said, trying to sound indignant. “I am not a woman.”

“That you are not,” Thor agreed. “But I can still carry you like one.”

He deposited Loki gently back onto the bed, where Loki immediately crawled back under the covers. Thor went under the blankets as well, rolling on top of Loki and going straight for his neck.

Almost instantly, Loki could feel his body responding to Thor's touch. Blood was rushing between his legs at a frightening rate, and he knew that soon Thor would feel his hardness. Thor was nipping gently, with just enough force, his stubble brushing coarsely across Loki's soft skin. Loki shivered, goosebumps raising on his arms, and leaned into the touch. A tiny whimper escaped his lips, unbidden.

Thor drove his body down harder in response to the sound. Loki felt Thor now between his legs, and he could envision what Thor's cock must look like now. He could see it in his mind: swollen and hard and needy. Wanting only one thing. Wanting *him*.

"Thor," he whispered.

"Hmm?" his brother asked, leaving bruises and marks all up and down Loki's throat.

"Can I...?" Loki grabbed the hem of Thor's shirt and experimentally tugged it upward. Thor sat up on his knees and pulled the shirt off, tossing it to the floor. He reached for the pullstring on his pants, but stopped short and looked at Loki before he continued.

"Do you want...?"

Loki nodded. "Please."

With some maneuvering, Thor worked off his pants and discarded them as well. Yet before he laid back down, Loki stopped him once more.

"Wait," Loki said. "Um...is...seeing me something you *really* want?" He was not sure what made him ask. He was not sure where his fear had gone to...but perhaps it was just the thought that they may never get another chance.

Thor's nod was instantaneous and frenetic. His smile grew even bigger. "But...only if you're all right with it," he hastily added.

Loki rolled his eyes and grabbed the hem of his shirt, then worked it off over his head. Thor's eyes were locked onto his pale, scrawny chest like it was the most beautiful treasure he'd ever beheld. Loki's face burned with embarrassment, and he reached up, grabbing hold of Thor's arms, and pulled him back down into a kiss.

The instant Thor's skin touched Loki's bare chest, his breath hitched. Thor was warm, *so* warm, and it flooded every crevice of Loki's body, from the tips of his fingers and down his legs. Loki's head was swimming with the ecstasy of Thor touching him like this; his entire body felt radiant. He never wanted Thor to leave, not ever, not for a second, because this was the happiest he had ever felt in his life.

"Do not make fun of me," he hissed once the kiss was broken.

"Never," Thor breathed. "Never, Loki, never."

Loki took in a breath and averted his eyes from Thor's gaze. "Move for a second," he grumbled. Thor plopped over to the side and Loki worked himself out of his pants. He grabbed them out from beneath the blankets and threw them to the growing pile on the floor. Thor watched him with wide eyes.

"Are you sure about this, Loki?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. Yes, I am very sure." The sensation of Thor's skin on his body was exhilarating; he needed more.

Wasting no time, Thor crawled atop him again. His cock was still hard, and Loki could feel it pushing up against his inner thigh as Thor continued to kiss him. The feel of it was intoxicating. Loki's hips bucked up into Thor's hips almost of their own accord. Thor drove down harder in response, his heavy body surrounding Loki on all sides.

Loki broke away from the kiss for a moment to whimper Thor's name. Thor's lips immediately reclaimed their place, drinking up his noises like the finest wine. His motions were growing steadily rougher, and Loki craved it, he loved it, he allowed it. He craved Thor's power, his intensity, he wanted Thor to give everything and not hold even the slightest bit back.

Thor shifted, just a little, and Loki's heart stopped as he realized that their cocks were touching. He gasped lightly, and Thor shifted again, grinding down against his brother with full force.

The sounds coming out of Loki's mouth would be shameful if anybody but Thor were to hear them. He whimpered openly, wantonly, like a needy whore, but he didn't even care. He would only make those sounds for Thor.

Thor bucked his hips forward, and Loki inhaled sharply. He was hard, almost painfully so, but the feeling of Thor's enormous, warm, powerful cock on his own overwhelmed any discomfort. He pushed up to meet Thor's sharp thrusts, unsure of exactly what he was seeking but knowing he needed it more than anything.

"I love you," Thor murmured lightly against the skin of Loki's neck. "I love you so much, Loki, my brother, I love you...."

His hips were grinding down and up, thrusting up towards Loki's stomach with animalistic rhythm. Loki felt the faintest hint of pleasure begin to build in his own groin, and he pushed up again, trying to match Thor's motion. Thor was breathing heavier now, sighing out his exhales into Loki's ear. Loki wrapped his arms around Thor's body, holding him tight and *close*, wishing he could meld their bodies into one.

"Thor," he whined, his tone sounding like he was about to cry. "Thor...."

"It's all right, it's all right," Thor repeated, over and over, kissing Loki in every spot he could reach. His lips, his cheeks, his temple, his forehead, his chin. All of it he loved, and all of it Thor poured affection on endlessly.

Loki had never felt this, not even when he had sought to pleasure himself. It had never been so intense, so deep, and so frightening. He clutched Thor tightly to his chest as if he were part of Loki's own body. Thor was thrusting his dick against Loki's with more and more force, and Loki's cock was swollen to its limit in response. He spread his legs wider, drawing his knees up higher, allowing Thor to do anything he wanted.

He began to gasp and exhale tiny sobs of pleasure as their dicks continued to rub against each other, unintentionally scratching deep into Thor's back with his nails. It was like nothing else he'd ever felt before. It was like his whole body was set to burst, and he wrapped his legs around Thor's body to draw him closer. He could never be close enough. Loki felt tiny droplets of sweat drip from Thor's forehead onto his face.

Loki let out a tiny shriek as he felt his climax coming. "Thor—*Thor!*" he shouted, scratching harder, clutching closer, wrapping his legs tighter. It was building and building and building, when it came it would be unbelievable, he would spill all over himself, it would be so, so good—

Loki screamed like a creature possessed when the orgasm hit him. He felt the hot, sticky spill of his release all over his stomach and between his legs. Thor did not stop thrusting forward, allowing Loki to ride the climax out to its faintest echoes, whimpering and gasping the whole way with not an ounce of shame. After it was over, Thor groaned and gasped, and a new wetness gathered on Loki's stomach. Thor's seed mixing with his. Thor paused to catch his breath, humped forward a few more times, and then relaxed, sweat pouring from his flawless blonde hair.

Thor's hand found its way to Loki's and squeezed it as tight as he dared. Thor collapsed on top of him, the wetness already cooling on Loki's stomach and thighs. His brother's face was buried in Loki's shoulder, his breath coming hard and even on Loki's overstimulated skin. Eventually, Thor lifted his face and met Loki's eyes. He smiled and leaned forward to kiss him.

Loki had always remembered their first kiss as the best and his favorite. It would be difficult now to choose between that one and this. Thor kissed him with such adoration, such love, such *worship*. Like he would never, ever bestow a kiss upon another person in all the world. Like his lips knew how to do nothing else but this.

When he broke away, Thor's eyes were glowing, and his smile radiated ecstasy. "I love you, Loki," he said. "More than anything."

Loki couldn't suppress his grin if he tried. "Did you spend the whole time coming up with that line?"

"No; it took me a few more months than that."

Loki forced himself to laugh to hide his complete embarrassment at the raw affection in Thor's eyes. He loved it, but he couldn't bear it. He wasn't used to being looked at that way. Perhaps he would get used to it in time.

They eventually both got up and went to Thor's bathroom to clean themselves. Loki tried not to look at himself in the mirror when they both descended into the bathtub, but Thor's eyes were completely glued to him. He had demanded to know what Thor was staring at, only to receive a laugh and an assurance of "Nothing, Brother".

Strangely, Loki didn't feel all that self-conscious about sharing the tub with Thor. He blamed it on how tired he had become, and his intense desire to clean himself up before falling asleep. It was only a short bath, in the end. When Loki got dressed again in Thor's sleeping clothes, he found that their scent had somehow returned as if nothing had ever changed. It was like being wrapped in a pure essence of Thor, and he loved it.

They crawled back into bed together, and immediately Thor's arms were around Loki. Thor kissed him gently atop his head. Clean, warm, next to Thor and dressed in Thor's clothes, Loki drifted to sleep in no time at all.

Chapter 7

Thor woke the morning after to the sound of soft, pattering rain on the window. Beside him, Loki slept soundly, his body rising and falling with his even breaths. Thor smiled, suppressing the urge to kiss him in the fear that it might awaken him. Instead, he laid there, listening to the rain, feeling Loki's warm body heat beside him, and pretending that none of it would ever change.

Waking up like this next to his little brother should, by all rights, terrify him. After all, what they'd done could never be erased. There was no telling what Odin might do if he ever found out. How would Thor be able to look Frigga in the eye again if she were to ever discover this? Thor could only try to push the thoughts out of his mind; he simply could not dwell on them. There was no answer. There was nothing to be done about it now.

Loki shifted, his inhaled breath grew deeper, and eventually he opened his eyes. Thor smiled at him as he looked around in confusion, trying to piece together where he was.

"Good morning," Thor said after a minute.

Loki yawned deeply and rubbed his eyes. "Morning," he mumbled. He turned over onto his back, closed his eyes, and exhaled. "It's so early."

Thor shuffled over and kissed Loki's cheek. "I enjoyed last night very much," he said, reaching over to brush some hair from Loki's face.

"Last night..." Loki repeated. His eyes opened, and the ghost of a smile appeared. "Right. ...I enjoyed it too."

"I don't know if I can make it another month without having you like that again."

Loki frowned, staring out the window at the gray morning skies. "I will not be here in a month, Thor. You didn't forget *that* part of last night, did you?"

"I didn't forget. I'm going to speak to Father about it today."

"Good luck with that," Loki replied sarcastically.

"I'm going to do it," Thor repeated. "I will find a way to convince him to let me go with you."

"And if you cannot?"

"Then I will come anyway."

As much as Thor wanted to bring the matter up as soon as breakfast began, he figured it would be better to wait until his lesson with Odin afterward. When he went to his father's study after their meal, he had already planned out in exact detail everything he was going to say.

"Shall we continue where we left off last time?" Odin asked, settling into his chair. He had had a cup of tea brought to him to stave off some of the growing chill inside the palace.

"Actually," Thor ventured, taking his seat as well, "I have something I'd like to ask you."

"What is that, son?"

“I was talking to Loki and he told me that you are planning to send him away with our ambassadors.”

Odin nodded. “Yes. You know that it is to be one of his primary duties.”

“Yes, and he told me that he was going to be away for a few months.”

“The time always varies depending on the matters at hand. But I suspect it will take no longer than a year.”

“Father, I would like to accompany him.”

Odin paused a bit before setting his cup down. He leaned back in his chair, his one eye fixed on Thor’s face. “And why would you want to do that?”

Because I cannot bear a year without Loki. “Because as future king of Asgard, shouldn’t I know about the relations between the realms? This seems like exactly the sort of thing I should be included in.”

“A king cannot do everything on his own, Thor. That is why we have councilors and servants and armies. Loki will be your advisor one day; these matters are his responsibility in order to allow you to tend to your own.”

“Yes, but I have still never seen most of the realms. The only one I’ve ever been to is Vanaheim, and that was ages ago. Shouldn’t I at least be familiar with the places I am helping to protect?”

“There will be time enough for you to see all that you need to see. It is not as though I am sending Loki away on his own. The ambassadors will be with him, as well as the Einherjar. There is no need to worry of his safety.”

Odin’s nonchalance was testing Thor’s patience, but he had to stay collected. “Are they planning to go to Jotunheim as well?”

Odin nodded. “Of course.”

“And you do not think such a thing is dangerous? What if Loki’s heritage is discovered at an inopportune time?”

“Do not worry, my son. I am not throwing your brother at Laufey’s mercy. This is a task that Loki must undertake.”

Thor gripped the armrests of his chair. He had expected his father to be stubborn, but what was worse, most of his logic made sense. By all rights, Thor shouldn’t be worried at all. But he did not want to concede, not yet.

“...What about Loki’s heat cycle?” he asked, his voice quiet. He could see his father tense up, ever so slightly.

“What about it?” Odin replied, keeping his tone neutral.

“It will expose him. He will appear as a Frost Giant in front of everybody.”

“Your mother explained to me that his...cycle returns but once a year. If it has just passed, then there is no need to believe it will return before he is home again.”

Thor had no argument for that. A part of him wanted to simply declare that he was going whether

Odin approved or not. But he knew better than to push his luck much farther than he already had.

He spent the rest of his day racking his brain for what else he could possibly say to convince his father. He could not argue with any of Odin's logic, nor could he let on how desperate he really was to go with his brother. On top of everything, Thor would not be able to handle it if Odin began to suspect even slightly what was truly going on.

The whole day was clouded with distraction. The storm did not let up, driving Thor's weapons practice inside to a cleared-out dining hall. He spent the whole time looking to see if Loki had come by to watch, but he was remarkably off-form during the entire lesson. And Loki never showed up at all.

By the time dinner came around, Thor wanted to crawl back into bed and forget this whole day had ever happened. What was he going to tell Loki? That he had given up? That he hadn't been able to muster up the courage to tell Odin he was going no matter what? It all made him miserable and sick to think of. He almost had no appetite at all once the family sat down to eat.

At the very least, Loki was there, and it warmed Thor's heart a bit just to see him. He wondered if there was any way he could convince Loki to come to his room again tonight; Thor couldn't fathom being in his bed all alone, not after last night. It would feel too empty without Loki in it.

He grinned a little, knowing that Loki would roll his eyes if he heard that. But the smile faded just as soon as it came. Thor would not get the chance to see Loki's face for a long while if he could not come up with a solution quickly.

Thor laid wide awake in bed. He had rethought his idea of wanting to invite Loki back into his room tonight. He couldn't bear telling Loki that he had not gotten anywhere with the All-Father and was out of ideas past blatant disobedience. The only thing he could think of was to come up with some reason why Loki *couldn't* go as opposed to why Thor *should*. Perhaps if Loki were sick? Or injured?

Thor tossed to the side. There had to be *something*. He couldn't give up on this. He would go *mad* without Loki here for an entire year.

There was a soft knock at his door, so faint Thor was sure he imagined it at first. He sat up in bed, frowning towards the door.

"Yes?" he called. "Come in."

The door creaked open slowly and Thor's heart leapt when Loki poked his head inside.

"Did I wake you?" Loki whispered, stepping inside.

"Not at all!" Thor exclaimed, leaping out of bed. He ran to the door and swept Loki up in his arms, hugging him tightly.

"Put me *down*," Loki demanded.

Thor set him down gently. "My apologies," he said with a smile. "Is everything all right? What brings you here so late?"

Loki patted down the front of his shirt and stared nervously at the floor. "I...wanted to ask you a favor."

“Anything.”

Loki paused a moment, considering his next words. “Would you come with me back to the vault?”

“Yes, of course.” Thor nodded vigorously. “But...may I ask why?”

“I will tell you once we’ve gone there. My, um...my magic has gotten better over the years, so we won’t need to worry about being discovered.”

“Sounds good. Let me get my shoes.”

And so Thor followed his brother, the two of them cloaked expertly by Loki’s magic, down through the hallways and into the deep chambers of the weapons vault. Thor could not think why Loki would want to go back there, but he firmly believed there was a good reason.

The journey down here was much quicker than the first time, all those years ago. Loki had been right about his improved magic; they walked past Einherjar guards without eliciting so much as a pause from them. Thor briefly wondered if Loki had ever used this particular glamour before, and for what purpose.

Loki seemed to know the way by heart. They finally arrived at the familiar double doors that lead to the Casket of Ancient Winters. Thor remembered, painfully clearly, how their world had completely changed last time they were here. Whatever emotions Loki held about this place, he guarded them effortlessly as he pushed the door open and signaled for Thor to follow him.

With the door closed, and them safely hidden away from all prying eyes, Loki dropped the magic spell and approached the Casket.

“Loki,” Thor asked cautiously, “may I ask now what we are doing here?”

Loki did not answer until he was standing behind the pedestal. He gazed at the Casket and then back to Thor, and immediately Thor understood why they were here.

“I just...need to know something,” Loki said, fidgeting with his hands as he glanced down at the shining relic.

“Is this a test?” Thor asked. He would be lying if he said he didn’t feel a bit hurt. But he would hear Loki out anyway.

“In a manner of speaking,” Loki replied.

“Loki...”

“I am not asking much. I only want to know if what you say—if what you have been saying this whole time—is true.”

Thor sighed. “Have I not said it enough? Loki—”

“You claim to love me,” Loki said, his voice devoid of emotion. “You claim to love me so much that you would be beside yourself with grief if I leave for so long. You claim to love me although we both now know I will lose my Aesir appearance once a year, and there is nothing I can do about it. You claim to love me despite knowing that we cannot love each other.”

“All this is true!”

Loki gently placed his hand atop the Casket. Thor watched, speechless, as the blue color seeped

into his skin, the pale pink hue fading out as Loki's Jotun body appeared. The curved, intricate lines rose on his arms, his face, his neck; his bright green eyes were replaced by blood-red crimson. Thor could even see the beginning of horn nubs just above Loki's forehead, a feature he had not noticed before. When the transformation was done, Loki pulled his hand away and approached Thor with an unreadable expression.

"Loki, what have you done?" Thor asked breathlessly. "You do not know how to change back."

"It will fade away with time," Loki assured him. He was mere inches from Thor's face now. He had never seen Loki so close. During the week that he had spent bedridden, Loki had been wrapped up firmly in his blankets. Thor realized now, with a sinking feeling in his gut, that he had not looked Loki directly in the eyes then. He had not liked the red color. He hadn't even been able to admit it to himself.

"Do you find me disgusting this way?" Loki asked, searching Thor's eyes for some emotion he could read.

"No," Thor replied, shaking his head mechanically. "I am...just not used to it, Loki."

"When will you be used to it? Years from now? Never?"

"Loki, I..." He was at a loss for words. His heart was sinking. He had never envisioned this, not once. Every time he had kissed his brother, he had looked Aesir. Like what Thor was used to. Every time they had laid together, it had been the pale skin that Thor loved, the smooth expanse of Loki's body devoid of Jotun ridges. He had never expected that *Loki* expected anything different of him.

"Or did you hope that you would not have to lay eyes on this ugly form but once a year?" Loki asked, his expression hardening and the conviction in his voice beginning to waver. "Did you think you could stomach it if your penance lasted but a week?"

"Loki, please don't misunderstand."

"What am I misunderstanding? We have never talked about this. Unless you think that reading books about Jotunheim is all you ever had to do to really accept me for who I am?"

"No," Thor said firmly, his tone a bit more stern than he'd intended, but he was growing upset. Not with Loki, but himself. "I have *always* known how important my acceptance is to you. I have been stupid, and foolish, and ignorant, and I am trying, every day, Loki, I am *trying* to do right by you. I am sorry for all the times I have failed you, because I have done it more times than I can count."

He raised his hand and put it on Loki's cheek. Save for a cooler body temperature and the feel of the raised lines, it felt the same. It was Loki. It would always be Loki. Thor brushed his thumb over Loki's temple, finding that the ridges left a pleasant sensation on his fingertips. He had touched Loki's face this way more times than he could remember. He knew exactly where his palm would fit, exactly where Loki would lean into his touch, exactly how his fingers would lightly grasp the back of Loki's neck.

And it struck him then, that this was not a glamour Loki had produced for practice. This was not a spell, but the breaking of a spell. This was *Loki*, all pretense and masks stripped away for the barest instant. Seeing him this way was a privilege that Loki would never, *ever* allow another person to have.

Besides Thor. Because Thor was the only person Loki trusted.

“I am sorry,” Thor said. “I have been a fool.”

“Have you now?” Loki asked, raising his chin slightly. The hardness in his eyes was falling away, piece by piece.

Thor felt a hardness around his heart begin to fall away as well.

“I have been,” he admitted. “But I still, and will forever love you, Loki.”

“Really?” Loki bit back. “You take one look at this body and feel your manhood growing stiffer by the second, do you?”

“You’ll have to give me a minute, I have yet to figure out the secret to an instant erection.”

Loki snorted. “This isn’t a joke,” he said, forcing the grin from his face.

“You are right. It is not a joke, and I have never taken anything in my life half as seriously as this.” Thor moved a bit closer, placing his other hand on Loki’s exposed cheek. He took a moment to acclimate himself with the exact location of Loki’s face ridges, running his fingertips over them and finding their texture intoxicatingly pleasant.

“I cannot deny this,” Thor continued. “That I have not been raised to find a Jotun body attractive. But then again, I was not raised to find my brother attractive either. ...I have done a lot of things I was not raised to do.”

Loki was silent, watching Thor’s face for one wrong move, one hesitation too many.

“You are a Frost Giant,” Thor said, his gaze never wavering from Loki’s eyes. “You are my brother. You are the person I love most in all the Nine Realms. Seeing you the way you truly are does not diminish any of the love I hold for you. I would still have you beside me, I would still have you in my bed, and I would still follow you no matter where you go or why.”

“So you still love me,” Loki whispered, “despite the fact that I am a Frost Giant?”

Even with the unfamiliar red eyes, the gleam that predicted coming tears, the gleam Thor recognized so well, was beginning to appear. Thor would know that look on any face that Loki wore. He would know every crease of Loki’s countenance, every movement of his lips, every emotion that crossed his eyes. He smiled, fondness overtaking him. Yes, Loki’s color was different now, but he was still Loki.

“Not ‘despite’,” Thor said. “I love all of you. I love that you are a Frost Giant. You would not be Loki if you were anything else.”

Loki pursed his lips and the red eyes began to well up. Thor brushed away the first tear that fell, and then carefully leaned forward and kissed Loki’s true face for the first time.

He still knew everything. He still knew the feel of Loki’s tongue, the contours of his mouth, the patterns of Loki’s breath as he exhaled into Thor’s lungs. Loki’s lips were cooler, and the lines on his face would take some time to memorize, but Thor would study those lines with more diligence than any of his king’s lessons. In time, he would know Loki’s body like it was his own body, he would discover every one of its secrets, and he would worship it with the utmost reverence.

Thor did not know how long they kissed. When they broke away, it was like an age had passed. Anything that had happened before tonight was already a lifetime away.

Thor looked down and saw the pale skin returning to Loki's body. He smiled. "I guess the effects of the Casket do not last very long at all."

Loki shook his head, smiling through his tears. "No," he said, wiping his eyes. "But I have been practicing a bit more shapeshifting magic. I cannot remove Odin's spell; I think it is too deeply embedded in me. But I have gotten fairly good at making myself appear Jotun."

Thor nodded, frowning slightly. "So," he reasoned aloud, "you cannot undo what Father has done, but you can add a different glamour on top of it?"

"More or less." Loki shrugged. "It does not look very good. I have been sneaking down here for some months with a mirror trying to memorize how I look for when I attempt the change."

Thor wanted to ask, *Why did you never ask me to assist?* But he knew the reason why. Loki had not trusted him enough then. He had not believed Thor was ready to accept him for what he truly was. Thor swallowed, pushing away his embarrassment. He would do better. He would be a worthy king, a worthy brother, and a worthy lover to Loki. Everything Loki could ever need. Everything he deserved.

He reached out and took Loki's hand. "If you would allow me, I would love to see a demonstration of these talents some time."

"I'm not very good at it yet," Loki confessed. "But if you promise not to laugh, I suppose I wouldn't mind."

They made their way back upstairs undetected. As they reached the split in the hallway—one side leading to Loki's room, the other to Thor's—Thor tugged Loki's hand towards his room with an eager smile.

Loki grinned back but shook his head. "Not tonight. But thank you, Thor."

Thor sighed, disappointed but understanding. "Very well." He kissed Loki's forehead. "Goodnight, Loki. I love you."

"I know."

By the next morning, the rain had let up. The sun was struggling to shine through patchy clouds in the sky, but as far as Thor was concerned it was a beautiful day. As he dressed and prepared to head down to breakfast, he was filled with renewed vigor and determination. He *would* find a way to convince Odin to let him accompany Loki and the others. Nothing could stop him.

However, once the family had gathered for the morning meal, Frigga was the first to speak.

"Thor, I spoke to your father yesterday," she said nonchalantly, adding a spoonful of sugar to her tea.

"Oh? What about?" Thor asked.

"He tells me you asked about Loki's trip with the ambassadors." She smiled. "He said that you wished to accompany him?"

"Yes!" Thor nodded. "I would love to see the other realms. I have hardly ever been out of Asgard."

Frigga looked to Loki. “Well, Loki? What do you think of your brother going with you?”

Loki shrugged, not even looking up from his meal. “I think he would be bored. But Thor will always do whatever he wants.” He looked up briefly to meet Thor’s eyes as he took a large bite of toast.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Frigga declared. “These matters concern you as well, Thor.”

Thor felt like shouting a war cry of victory. “Are you sure, Mother?” he asked, his hands shaking with excitement and adrenaline. “It’s all right if I go too?”

From his end of the table, Odin grumbled. “Your mother was quite convincing once I broached the subject with her,” he admitted. “But you will be expected to keep up with your studies while you are gone.”

“Of course, Father, of course!”

“I will be sending a tutor with you, and should I hear of any misbehavior, you will come straight home.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “I’d give it a month.”

Thor smiled at his brother from across the table. Despite Loki’s outward indifference, there was no mistaking the look of relief and excitement hidden deep in his eyes.

That night, Thor once again invited Loki to his bed, and this time Loki accepted.

They laid side by side, looking through an old picture book of all the Nine Realms. It was something Loki had dug out of his bookshelf; Frigga had read these stories to them more times than they could count. They were looking at the pictures of Jotunheim, the dark icy ravines and the towering mountains. The pictures twinkled and moved, illuminating the permafrost by the weak light of Jotunheim’s sun.

“Are you excited to see it?” Thor asked, one arm slung over Loki’s shoulders.

“Yes and no,” Loki admitted. “It looks cold and dark. It’s hard to believe that anything can live there at all.”

“This is just one picture, though. If somebody painted a picture of the ugliest place in Asgard, nobody would want to come here either.”

“You mean your room, I am assuming.”

“I cleaned it up for you! A little.”

“Mm-hmm.” Loki turned the page as Thor kissed his cheek.

“I hope you understand,” Loki continued, “that this means we cannot continue our bargain.”

Thor frowned. “Why is that?”

“What you said was I had to accompany you to the river every month until you are crowned. If we are so far away in Vanaheim, or Nidavellir, we won’t be able to go to the river.”

Thor watched Loki's face. "True. Are you saying that you still have intentions to leave Asgard one day?"

Loki shrugged. "I am saying that if I do, I will no longer have to wait until your coronation to do so. The contract's conditions have not been fulfilled."

"Then shall we forge a new contract?"

Loki turned his head and raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" He placed the open book on his chest. "What do you suggest?"

Thor looked upward towards the canopy of the bed, pretending to think. "I will need some time to consider it. But I'm sure I will come up with something."

For a while they did not say anything. Thor reached over and placed his hand on Loki's cheek, gently stroking his thumb over his brother's face, kissing his temple and reveling in the fact that for once, there was nothing to worry about. He could lie here, in his bed, next to his brother, and not concern himself with petty details.

"When we visit the other realms," Thor asked, "what will our, um...sleeping arrangements be?"

Loki smirked and rolled his eyes. "You are insufferable."

"What? I want to know!"

"Most of the realms have Asgardian embassies where we will be able to stay. Others, like Jotunheim, do not. We will probably have to make do with tents."

"And huddling together for warmth," Thor added cheekily, rolling over and snuggling into Loki deeper.

"Thor, seriously," Loki said through pieces of laughter, "if you are going to come along with us, we cannot forget ourselves. The ambassadors will almost never leave us alone since we are Odin's only sons. It will not be the months-long vacation with me that you wish it to be."

"If you say so." Thor pressed a kiss to Loki's neck, and then another, nipping the soft skin gently and sucking. "I do not intend to ignore you the entire time."

"Be that as it may...I just hope you will not forget yourself."

Chapter 8

The weeks passed. Thor and Loki made their preparations to leave, and finally the day came. Their first stop was to be Vanaheim. An admittedly short stop, after all, as relations between Asgard and Vanaheim had been amiable for ages. It would be an easy first visit, one where Loki could observe inter-realm relations with little disturbance.

Loki had packed the emerald from Thor with the intent of wearing it to the ambassador meetings. It was unlikely anybody would know the significance of it, and therefore unlikely anybody would tell him to remove it. What's more, the gift reminded him of Thor, and he had not worn it since Thor had given it to him. He wouldn't run the risk of having Thor think he hated it; when Thor looked disappointed his expression was uncomfortably akin to that of a kicked puppy.

Even though Thor had managed to accompany them on this trip, Loki knew they would not get to spend every day together. Most of Loki's time would be filled up with the ambassadors, and Thor still had his own lessons to tend to. The best Loki could hope for was that some days would be finished sooner than others, and they would get to have at least a few hours alone.

As it turned out, the sleeping arrangements in Vanaheim were ideal for just such a thing. While Asgard's palace towered over the city, its height unmatched by any other structure in the realm, Vanaheim's palace was just the opposite. The building itself only had one or two levels, from what Loki could tell on the outside, but it was wider than it was tall, stretching in all directions for what had to be at least a mile.

The Asgardian embassy had its own wing in Vanaheim's palace. Loki recalled that it was the same back home, though he had never had cause to go to that particular area of Asgard's palace. Perhaps in the coming years he would spend most of his time there, if his predetermined fate of being Asgard's envoy played out the way it was meant to.

Loki was given his own chambers, and somewhat to his surprise, Thor was permitted to share them. Neither of them had even had to ask; the envoys had apparently planned it this way. The room was nearly as large as Thor's back home, with two beds which, as Thor cheekily pointed out, they would not be needing one of.

"This is exactly what I am talking about when I say we need to be careful," Loki said, rolling his eyes and dropping his bag on the floor. "I have no idea how much privacy we actually have in this room."

"Looks to me like it's private enough," Thor replied, gazing out the window. From here they had an excellent view of the palace's gardens. The flowers that grew in Vanaheim were taller and more colorful than anything they had back home. He would have to see if he had leave to pick any of them. Of course, he'd *say* they were gifts for Frigga, were anybody to ask. As for how he planned on getting them home to her without them wilting, well...hopefully nobody would think about it quite that hard.

"Well," Loki said, "let's not push our luck so soon. They are holding a feast to celebrate our arrival tonight. Do try not to get too drunk."

"I will promise to try. I will not promise to not do it."

"Do not get drunk, Thor."

Thor flopped backwards onto his bed. "I am nearly a king," he whined theatrically. "I thought kings *gave* orders, not took them."

"And I am to be your advisor," Loki replied. "So you had best get in the habit of listening to me."

The feast that night lasted much longer than Loki had anticipated. Once Vanaheim had discovered that both princes would be in attendance, the feast turned into a much bigger celebration than originally planned. It became obvious early on that Thor would not, in fact, listen to Loki's advice about drinking. Barely two hours in and he was already on his sixth horn of mead.

Soon enough it was already midnight, and Loki could not bear it a second longer. He had made his appearances for long enough; he excused himself from the table and went back to the room. Truth be told, he had been hoping that Thor would not get himself drunk because Loki had wanted to practice some shapeshifting tonight. Regardless, he was too tired to muster up any energy for it.

The next morning, Loki woke up to the sight of a wretched bundle of blankets and clothes atop Thor's bed. He couldn't help but smirk to himself as he got up and walked over to the miserable remains of his brother.

"Oh, Brother?" Loki asked sweetly, gently rocking Thor's body. "It's time to wake up."

Thor groaned and threw the blanket from his face. It seemed he had at least had the wherewithal to change into his sleeping clothes last night. That was a good start.

Thor's eyes searched the room, wincing at the sunlight streaming in through the window. When he finally settled on Loki's face, he said, "...I didn't listen to you, did I?"

Loki shook his head. "You did not."

Thor slung an arm over his eyes and sighed gloomily. "This was not how I wanted our first day to go."

Loki shrugged. "It's done with now. Stay there a moment."

"Where are you going?" Thor asked, peeking out from behind his forearm.

"Nowhere, just sending for a few things from the healers."

Loki opened the door and spoke briefly with the servant waiting outside, and then headed towards the door leading into the chamber's bathroom. Thor watched him with one squinted eye, the sunlight in the room far too bright than was necessary. Eventually, Loki re-entered carrying a small basin of water and a washcloth. He pulled a chair over to Thor's bedside and sighed heavily.

"I really should just make you reap what you have sown," Loki declared, wetting the cloth. He gently coaxed Thor's arm down and placed the cloth over his eyes. Thor sighed out in relief; the water was cold and so, so refreshing. "And yet, I cannot stand to hear you whining."

"Forgive me, Brother," Thor said. "I cannot back down from a challenge." He grinned. "Though if you think I look bad, you should see the Vanir warriors I took to task last night."

Loki smirked. "I can only imagine."

There was a knock on the door and Thor winced at the sharp noise.

“Come in,” Loki called.

The servant from earlier entered the room, carrying one tiny bottle and two larger ones from the healers’ room. Loki thanked her and sent her back out. Thor lifted a corner of the washcloth to see.

“What is all that?” he asked.

“This here,” Loki replied, holding up the smallest bottle, “is pain relief for your headache. It should take the worst of the pain off for now. And this other one—” he lifted another “—you will drink a cup of this three times today. It is for the long-term.”

Thor nodded. “And that other one?”

“This is water.” Loki plopped the bottle on Thor’s stomach. “You will drink that—and *only* that—all day until you are rehydrated.”

Thor grinned weakly. “Thank you, Loki.”

Loki shrugged, removing the top from the first concoction. He did not think it such a big deal. Thor had done more than enough when he had spent a week with Loki during his first heat cycle. Perhaps with this, Loki could begin to repay him, just a little. “If my responsibility is to keep the future king of Asgard from killing himself through sheer stupidity, then I will undertake the task,” he replied, and held out the bottle for Thor to drink.

Thor accepted it and forced down the bitter liquid, grimacing as he finished. “This better not be a prank, Loki.”

“*Please*. Do you truly think so little of me, that I would take advantage of you while you are weakened?”

Thor sighed. “Fine. A kiss would help, though.”

Loki moved the damp cloth from Thor’s forehead and pressed his lips there, lingering for several seconds before pulling away.

“I have to get dressed now,” he said softly, his lips just barely hovering above Thor’s skin.

Thor reached out and grabbed Loki’s hand. “I’m feeling a little better now,” he said, the color beginning to return to his face as he spoke. “I think your kisses are doing the trick, Loki.”

“I can’t be late on the first day,” Loki insisted.

“Then you would leave me here to suffer.” Thor pouted dramatically.

“And they say *I* am manipulative.” Loki leaned over for another kiss, and Thor wrapped his arms around his brother’s shoulders and pulled him down on top of him. Their lips met again, and the rank odor of Thor’s breath—a combination of alcohol, sleep, and the bitter medicine—flooded into Loki’s mouth.

“Mm—ugh—*oh HELL*,” Loki sputtered, pushing himself away and jumping to his feet.

“What?” Thor protested.

“*I have to get dressed*,” Loki shouted back, rushing into the bathroom.

The first day in Vanaheim went smoother than Loki had anticipated. There had been little to no actual issues to resolve between this realm and Asgard, save a few humble requests concerning weapons trade. Most of the conversation was dominated by who would bring what to whose feast later in the year. Still, it gave Loki a good chance to examine the ambassadors' body language and diction, study the subtle cues and methods they employed in their diplomacy. Here, in Vanaheim, where they were primarily among allies, the mood in the room was easy and relaxed. Loki doubted that once they reached more hostile realms it would be the same.

He did not see much of Thor during the day. Once, as he was following the envoys to the dining hall for lunch, he caught a glimpse of Thor in the training yard. He had a crowd of young Vanir warriors watching him as he took on three lancers at once. At the very least, he seemed to have made some friends.

Just as long as he didn't spend any more time than necessary with those friends, Loki didn't mind *so* much.

From what Loki had been able to determine, they were set to stay in Vanaheim one more day, and then they would travel on to Alfheim. That visit, Loki was told, was not expected to take long either. However, after that they would move to Nidavellir and Jotunheim, two realms that could take nearly a month each.

Loki sighed heavily once he was back in his room, sitting on the floor across from Thor.

"That doesn't sound *so* bad," Thor said, drying his hair from the lengthy bath he'd just returned from. "It's good to start simple and then move on to more difficult tasks."

"It's hardly the diplomacy that I'm worried about," Loki replied, fidgeting with the handheld mirror on the floor beside him.

"You needn't worry about Jotunheim. I will be there with you the entire time."

Loki sighed again and picked up the mirror, handing it over to his brother. "Can we get started?"

"Yes," Thor replied eagerly, accepting the mirror and holding it up for Loki to see himself. "I promise not to distract you."

Loki glared. "If you say so."

Casting magic had never been difficult for Loki. Frigga had always said he had a natural talent. There was something so easy about making something out of nothing, making a thought into reality. Despite Odin's wishes that Loki not pursue the art of shapeshifting, Frigga had encouraged Loki in it. She knew more than her handful of tricks, and guided Loki along as best she could.

It was not so difficult, really. It was just like wrapping oneself in a blanket, one that could take any form Loki could possibly imagine. He cleared his mind and envisioned the sight of his Jotun face in the mirror. He tried to remember how his eyes had looked, the exact positioning of the ridges in his skin, the angle of the nubby horns.

"Loki, you're changing!" Thor exclaimed with excitement as the blue color shimmered over Loki's skin. "You're doing it!"

"I *know*, stop distracting me," Loki replied, looking down at his hands. The blue skin was easy enough to create. It was the details that he still could not get right. He glanced up into the mirror. His eyes were red, he had gotten that part easily enough, but the horns weren't right.

He glanced up at Thor, who was smiling and had a look of...pride? Loki dropped the glamour immediately.

“Aww,” Thor whined, setting down the mirror. “What happened?”

“I...got flustered,” Loki explained, rubbing his temples.

“Is it because I’m staring at you? How about this...I’ll just look away while you’re working on the change. When you’re ready, you just say so and I’ll take a look at you then.”

“O...okay.”

Thor held the mirror up in front of his face, obscuring Loki’s view of his eyes. Loki breathed and tried again.

The blue color came as easily as ever. The lines rose up on his face in the pattern he’d memorized, the horn nubs sprouted on his forehead, and his eyes darkened to the color of spilt blood. He frowned at his reflection, adding a few tweaks and changes, erasing some lines that weren’t quite right, and wasn’t it supposed to be darker shade of blue than this? He contemplated starting all over again, but then:

“How is it coming along, Brother?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Can I see?”

“I suppose.”

Thor slowly lowered the mirror, his eyes going wide at the sight of Loki’s face. There was an emotion there that Loki could not read...but at the very least, it did not appear to be disgust. He gently set the mirror down and inched himself closer. Cautiously, he raised a hand, stopping just short of reaching out to touch.

“You look beautiful,” he said, breathless and quiet.

Loki scoffed and looked away. “Thank you. But there is room for improvement.”

“May I...will it mess up the magic if I touch you?”

“I don’t believe it will.”

Carefully, as if Loki were made of glass, Thor placed his hand on his brother’s skin. His fingers curled softly into the back of Loki’s neck, his calloused thumb dragging lightly across his cheek. Thor paused, frowning.

“What’s wrong?” Loki asked, his insides freezing up.

“Hmm.” Thor raised his other hand and touched Loki’s other cheek. He rubbed his other thumb up and down Loki’s skin, glancing up at the ceiling as he pondered something.

“Right around...here,” he said, tracing a line from Loki’s temple down to his jawline. “There should be another one of those ridges. I remember feeling it there earlier.”

“I...oh. All right, let me....” Loki grabbed the mirror and took a quick look at where Thor was touching him.

“Just from here,” Thor said, touching a fingertip just beside Loki’s ear, “down to here. I know I felt it then.” He turned to sit beside Loki and stared into the mirror with him.

“All right.”

It was an easy fix. Just some slight manipulation was needed, and Loki saw Thor’s eyes light up once the change was in place.

“There it is!” he said happily.

Loki chuckled and set the mirror down again. “It’s a bit disconcerting that you know my body better than I do.”

“And one day you will know mine better than I do.” Thor planted a soft kiss in the crook of Loki’s neck, eliciting a sharp inhale.

“Thor,” Loki protested. Thor laid his head down on Loki’s shoulder, looking up at him with the most irresistible of smiles. “Anybody could be listening.”

“What? Is it not traditional in Asgard for brothers to display their affections thusly?”

“The Vanir know very well that it is not.”

“Times change.” Thor turned his head to press another kiss to Loki’s shoulder. “Speaking of times, our monthly date is coming up.”

“We will be in Alfheim next week,” Loki reminded him. “Our sleeping arrangements may not allow it.”

“Then I will come to your window and spirit you away into the night.”

“Thor, I am not your blushing maiden bride.”

“True. One day we shall both see to it that you are a maiden no longer.”

Then Loki really did blush, dropping the glamour and resuming his Aesir form. “...One day,” he agreed. “Though by certain rules, some might say we have already, uh...lain together.”

“Certain rules?” Thor frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You know very well what I mean. I have shared your bed. We have been...together.”

“Oh, that? We laid together for certain. But one day I will do more than that.” Thor lifted his head and reached over to brush some hair behind Loki’s ear. “When we are both ready, I will not simply lay you down and rut against you. I will make love to you, in every way that you deserve.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Big talk for the maiden prince of Asgard.”

“Just you wait, Brother.” Thor grinned. “I am confident that I can do better.”

Sleeping arrangements in Alfheim were less than ideal. Loki was to share the embassy housing with the rest of the ambassadors, yet Thor was given more lavish apartments in the Alfheim palace. Once they had caught wind that the firstborn heir of Odin was coming as well, the elves had been overjoyed. The first night after their arrival, there had been an entire feast just in honor of Thor’s

presence. Thor would be lying if he said he hadn't loved the attention.

Loki, on the other hand, was less than impressed. Thor had been getting *so* much attention since their arrival that it actually hindered the progress of the envoys. Their short trip was becoming much longer than expected.

What was worse, since their sleeping quarters were so far away from each other, Loki had no time to see Thor almost at all. He saw him at evening meals, but Thor was often so surrounded by sycophantic elves that there was no chance of speaking with him. Loki told himself not to worry about it. They would be gone from here soon enough.

The day of their monthly date arrived. Unfortunately, it was the ambassadors' busiest day yet. Loki quickly learned that the elves had absolutely no notion of straightforwardness, and discussing the simplest idea took three times as long as it truly needed to. They spoke long into the night, taking their meals in the embassy meeting room, and by the time they had finally wrapped up, Loki could not imagine doing anything but falling straight to sleep.

When he returned to his chambers, a young handmaiden handed him a message and a flower. She giggled and told him that it was from a secret admirer.

Loki would know Thor's handwriting anywhere.

To the esteemed Prince Loki of Asgard – I have watched you since the day you came to Alfheim and my heart has been taken by your breathtaking countenance. I send you this rose in the hopes that you might behold a thing which rivals your beauty in even the smallest sense.

Yours truly, the one whose heart beats thunderously for you

P.S. You have a spectacular ass.

It took all of Loki's self-control to keep a straight face as he finished reading the letter. He asked the girl who had given this to her, to which she cheekily responded she did not know, as revealing the name of a secret admirer was bad luck. Loki doubted that very much, but he thanked her all the same.

The next morning, as the Asgardian ambassadors had their final meal in Alfheim, Loki caught a glimpse of Thor's wide grin across the table.

They set out for Nidavellir shortly afterward. Loki was certain he saw more than a few teary-eyed elf maidens in the crowd as they waited for the Bifrost to open. Thor was grinning and waving at many of them, and Loki smiled inwardly. Let the elven girls despair; if only they knew it was Loki who truly held Thor's affections. Part of him wanted to grab Thor and kiss him deeply as the girls watched on, but such an action would be inadvisable at best.

Nidavellir was their next destination. The mountains seemed to rival even the palace of Asgard in height and grandeur, though there was very little else Loki found impressive about it.

Aboveground, the land was rocky and sterile, monochrome and desolate. He was told that Nidavellir's true grandeur laid underneath, where the dwarves dwelt in their caves and tunnels, but he doubted it would be anything he cared for.

Unlike Vanaheim and Alfheim, relations between Asgard and Nidavellir were professional at best. The dwarves were notoriously greedy, always claiming they should receive more than they gave. Sadly enough, staying on their good side was advisable, as the metalwork and weapons that the

dwarves produced had no equal. Despite their gruffness, the dwarves had guest chambers for them. Though perhaps “chambers” was a bit of a misnomer, as it was just a circular cavern with a few rooms off to the side behind thick wooden doors. One room would be Thor and Loki’s, while the higher ranking ambassadors would receive the others, and the Einherjar would sleep in the central part of the cave.

It was all in all a miserable place. Loki would say that he hated everything about it, but there was one single shining beacon of hope, and that was the fact that he got to share a room with Thor. Of course, Einherjar were stationed outside at every hour of the day, leaving no room for anything more intimate than a kiss, but he could not complain otherwise.

Loki learned quickly that he was going to hate every minute of this realm. The dwarves were stubborn in much the same way Thor was, but with none of his disarming charm. It drove Loki mad, but since he was there to learn and observe, not to interfere, he could do nothing to speed up the process. He had a million ideas and a million things he wished to say, but every time he opened his mouth he was hushed by one of the ambassadors.

His only solace was that he could complain to Thor at night. While their chambers were underground, Thor ventured out to the surface with the Einherjar and spent his days training among the mountains and cliffs. There was a river near the training ground not unlike the one back home where Thor washed himself every day before settling in with Loki for the night. Loki was glad Thor had the foresight to clean himself, but somewhat disappointed he did not get the opportunity to watch.

“They are all such flatterers,” Loki whined, combing out Thor’s damp hair. “Nobody will say what we are all thinking. If the dwarves are this difficult and disrespectful all the time, why do we continue to allow it? You should *hear* the way they spoke to us today!”

“It’s in their nature,” Thor replied, looking over his shoulder. “Not everybody is going to be easy to deal with, Brother.”

“Well, thinking of dealing with this lot for another few weeks makes me want to cry.” Loki grumbled and gathered a few strands of Thor’s hair, beginning to work them into a braid.

“What are you doing?” Thor asked.

“Hold still and look forward. You are always getting your hair in your face. This will help.”

“...If you say so.”

Thor stayed still as Loki began to plait another braid on the other side, joining them in the middle and tying them together. “There we are,” he said.

“Do I look like a woman?” Thor asked, reaching for the hand mirror at his side.

“No,” Loki replied, giving his head a playful shove. “You look like a warrior who can see.”

Thor admired himself in the mirror, and Loki saw his lips raise into a smile. “It’s not so bad, actually. Thank you, Loki.”

Loki shrugged. “Without me you would have fallen off a cliff by now in pursuit of a butterfly or some such nonsense.”

“Without you I would have thrown myself from the cliff.”

“Honestly, where are you getting this? The lines you use in an attempt to seduce me are embarrassing.”

Thor frowned and turned to face his brother. “What’s embarrassing about them?”

“Oh?” Loki raised his eyebrows. “Shall I read the letter that you sent me in Alfheim?”

“What letter?” Thor asked cheekily. “Was somebody trying to court my brother without me knowing?”

“Thor, please.”

“Tell me their name. I’ll smash their head in.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “You have a lot to learn about being romantic, Brother.”

“Perhaps.” Thor leaned forward and planted a tiny kiss on Loki’s lips. As he pulled away he whispered, “Do you think they can hear us?” He gestured to the door which separated their room from the rest of the cave.

Loki shook his head. “I placed an enchantment earlier. It’s not very powerful, but should keep them from hearing anything suspicious.”

“I should have known you would think of everything.”

“One of us has to. But we can’t do anything bold. We can’t risk that here, no matter what.”

Thor nodded. “I understand. ...But I can still kiss you, right?”

“You owe me at least ten.”

Thor grinned and pressed his lips against Loki’s once again. “Then I must repay my debt.”

The days in Nidavellir dragged by. They were only made bearable by the fact that Loki could return to the room with Thor each night. The two of them typically had several hours alone after the evening meal, and as far as Loki could tell, nobody was suspicious of anything. Loki slept next to Thor in his bed, growing more and more accustomed to the way his arms fit around Thor’s body and learning the contours in Thor’s muscles.

He was also learning about Thor’s more sensitive spots. For instance, Loki had recently discovered that kissing the front of Thor’s throat drove Thor absolutely insane with pleasure. They had been kissing one night and Loki had experimentally nipped at a few places on Thor’s neck, in the hopes that Thor might enjoy it. Thor had enjoyed it all well enough, but the instant Loki’s lips touched the soft flesh of Thor’s throat, Thor had gasped so loud Loki was certain somebody must have heard.

Nothing between them had gotten any heavier than that. With so many of the ambassadors just outside the room, it was too much to risk. Thor whined periodically about wanting to lay with Loki again, but they both knew it could not be done.

They would both have to learn to wait, and control themselves. It was unlikely they would get the necessary privacy again until after Jotunheim, which was still a couple of weeks away. For the first time, Loki found himself wishing that Thor had not come after all. If Thor had thought originally

that going without Loki for several months would be torture, it would have assuredly been nothing compared to being stuck in close quarters without being allowed to touch him.

Still, despite his constant whining and obvious pouting, Loki felt secure in the knowledge that Thor would never try to force himself on Loki.

Somehow, agonizingly, the end of their stay in the dwarf homeland was nearing. They would be heading for Jotunheim at the end of the week.

According to the ambassadors, since there was obviously no Asgardian embassy in Jotunheim, they would be staying in tents some ways outside of Laufey's palace. They had been given leave to set up camp in a spacious cavern that should accommodate them all.

"That's even *less* privacy than what we had before," Thor whined, falling backwards onto his bed and groaning.

"You're the one that wanted to come," Loki replied, folding up a few of his clothes and packing them away. "You knew this wasn't going to be a vacation."

"I know...I don't regret coming, if that's what you're trying to say." Thor sat up, leaning back on his elbows. "I don't know what I would have done by now if I was still back home."

"You would have found something to do." Loki turned to face his brother and reached for the small trinket in his pocket. "Now, if you don't mind, close your eyes."

Thor raised an eyebrow. "What for?"

"I have a present for you. Close your eyes or you're not getting it."

"Oh! All right." Thor sat up straighter and did as Loki asked.

"Hold out your hand." Thor did so, and Loki hesitated for half a second before pulling Thor's gift out of his pocket. He would either like it, or he would laugh. Loki steeled himself and dropped it into Thor's outstretched palm.

Thor peeked with one eye before opening them completely. "Oh, what's this?" he asked with a smile.

"It's a necklace," Loki answered, crossing his arms over his chest. "Isn't that obvious?"

"Of course it is," said Thor, grinning as he held up the leather string and taking hold of the metal pendant hanging down. "This here...it's—"

"Mjolnir," Loki said. "I asked the dwarves to make it for you. They're stubborn, but all it really takes is a bit of sweet-talking to get them to do just about anything." He paused. "I put it on leather for you so you wouldn't feel like a woman wearing it."

"Loki, I would wear a wedding dress to a feast if it was a gift from you." Thor stood up and pulled Loki into a deep kiss. "Will you put it on me?"

Loki grinned. "Of course. Turn around."

Thor stole one more kiss before turning around and lifting his hair out of the way. Loki tied the necklace around Thor's neck, just enough to encircle his throat without constricting it.

"Now let me see." He took hold of Thor's shoulders and turned him back around. Loki grinned. "It

looks perfect.”

“I love it,” Thor replied with a smile. He grabbed Loki up in a hug and swung him in a circle. “I love it!”

“All *right*,” Loki grumbled, smacking Thor on the back. “Put me down.”

Thor set him down gently and pulled him back in for another kiss. “I will wear it every day until I ascend to Valhalla.”

Loki did not have the heart to roll his eyes at that. Thor hugged him close and pressed another kiss to his lips; Loki opened his mouth and allowed Thor in, as he always did. He was beginning to feel as if his body belonged to Thor just as much as it belonged to him.

Or at least, this one did.

“Thor?” Loki asked, pulling away from the kiss. Thor went in to nip at his neck, as he always did.

“Hmm?” Thor replied.

“...Can I ask you a favor?”

“Anything.” Another bite and a deep kiss. “Anything, Loki.”

“When—” Loki winced; Thor knew that one spot tickled “—when you and I...lay together again...would you—would you do it when I am Jotun?”

Thor stopped and slowly raised his face. He was frowning and Loki felt his heart sink. It wasn’t as though he exactly expected Thor to be *enthusiastic* about it, but....

“There is quite a bit of time before your heat cycle comes again,” Thor said. “How am I supposed to wait that long?”

Loki blinked. “Um...” he stammered, “y-you don’t mind?”

“Mind what? What you look like?” Thor smiled fondly. “I like it when you look like you. When you look like a Frost Giant.”

“You didn’t used to.”

“I used to be close-minded. I’ve changed.” Another kiss. “I will make love to you when you appear Jotun. I will do it gladly.”

Loki wrapped his arms around Thor and hugged him as tightly as he could manage. He could feel Thor pressing kisses to the top of his head, could feel Thor’s strong hands rubbing up and down his back. “Are you sure?” Loki whispered tightly. “Are you *sure*?”

“Of course. Of course, Loki, my sweet brother, of course....”

“I don’t know when the heat cycle will come again...but...when we are in Jotunheim next week... I don’t know what will happen to my body then.” He paused, all the terrible possibilities rushing into his head. “...What if everything I touch in Jotunheim triggers the change, just like the Casket does?”

“We will figure it out together, Loki. I promise I will let no harm come to you, no matter what happens. Even if everybody sees, I will defend you against the whole of the Einherjar.”

“Well...sweet as that is, let’s hope it does not come to that.”

Chapter 9

The Asgardians bid farewell to Nidavellir gladly. After days and days of teeth-pulling and flattery and talking in circles, the envoys' business with the dwarves was finally done. Despite the ambassadors' joy at being finished with the stubborn race, they looked on Jotunheim with no more enthusiasm. As they waited for the Bifrost to open, Loki heard several of the Einherjar joking about how the visit was likely to trigger a new war, and how many Jotnar they would kill as a result.

Thor grabbed onto Loki's hand and squeezed it tightly. Loki decided to ignore the jeers of the Einherjar for now.

Jotunheim was just as Loki had always read about. Dim light, icy caverns as far as the eye could see, and a biting wind that cut harsher than any knife. Strangely enough, though it was certainly *cold*, Loki was not in any great discomfort.

Thor sidled up to him, already bundled up in all the appropriate furs, and asked, "Are you doing all right, Brother?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Loki replied. "It's hardly brisk at all."

Once the party had made their way to their designated cavern, Loki began to feel the beginnings of panic deep in his heart. What if something went wrong while they were here, and everybody saw that he was a Frost Giant? The Einherjar would not hesitate to kill him and leave him to die in this wasteland. Loki doubted that even Thor could protect him from them. What if being near other Jotnar triggered his heat cycle somehow?

Loki should never have come here with them. He should have come up with an excuse as to why he could not continue. He should have feigned an illness, an injury, *something*....

"Loki!"

He jumped and whirled around to see Thor, carrying an armful of blankets and fur pelts.

"They said we could have the furthest spot from the entrance," Thor said, gesturing deeper into the cave. "Come on, help me pick out where you want our tent to be."

The first day and night were largely unremarkable. Thor went out with some of the warriors to hunt food for the rest of them. Their catch had been unexpectedly large, resulting in an impromptu Asgardian feast in the cave that night. Loki usually did not find pleasure in such debauchery, but tonight he was especially distracted. Tomorrow he and the other envoys would have to go into Laufey's palace, among Frost Giants, and attempt to rebuild the smoldering remains of peace between their realms.

Loki excused himself once he was finished with his share of food. He supposed that he shouldn't have been surprised to hear Thor entering their tent not long afterward.

Thor sat down beside Loki on the bed where he had already bundled himself up in layers of blankets.

"Are you nervous?" Thor asked, gently placing his hand on Loki's shoulder.

“Of course I’m nervous, Thor,” Loki spat back. “I should never have come here.”

“You *should* be here,” Thor insisted. “This is your homeland! Are you not proud to finally see it?”

“*No*. It is miserable, cold, dark, and you heard the way they were all saying they hated it. Everybody wishes to be free from here, and I can’t say I blame them.”

“They are just not used to the cold. When it snows in Asgard do you not hear them complain twice as much?”

Loki rolled over and faced Thor. His brother was smiling in the half-light, with all the patience in the world, not an ounce of anger or judgment on his face.

“...Thor,” he said warily.

“Yes, my dear little brother?” Thor leaned down closer.

“There is something...something I have not told you all these years.”

“Oh? And what is that?”

“...When I asked Father...when I asked Odin all those years ago about who I was...about why I turned into a Jotun when I touched the Casket of Ancient Winters, there was more that he told me.” Loki swallowed hard. “...Thor, Laufey is my father.”

Thor considered that for a moment, and then nodded. “All right. Then he is your father. It changes nothing, Loki.”

“It changes *everything*, Thor! What if Laufey recognizes me somehow?”

Thor laughed aloud and placed his hand on Loki’s face. “Loki, you were but an infant when you left here. You do not need to worry about Laufey knowing who you are.”

“I want to go home,” Loki pouted. “I hate this place and everybody else does too.”

Thor sighed and sat up again. He removed his boots, tossing them to one side of the tent, and pulled off his shirt. Lifting the blankets, he coaxed Loki aside and snuggled in beside his brother.

“You are stronger than you realize, Loki,” Thor said, wrapping his arms around him. “We have been to three realms already and all was well. It shall be no different here. If you wish it I will even come with you into the palace tomorrow.”

“I don’t think they will allow it.”

“They will *allow* nothing. I will go where I please. It will be a show of good faith as well. If I as the future king of Asgard am willing to assist in rebuilding peace between our realms, then it may lead Laufey to trust me in ways that he does not trust Father.”

Loki sighed heavily and nuzzled deeper into Thor’s arms. If he could just stay here, exactly like this, then he would be well. If he did not have to face anything whatsoever, if he did not have to hide, if he did not have to do *anything* at all, then all would be perfect.

He breathed in Thor’s scent, heavy and musky like a drug, and relaxed some of the tension in his shoulders. Loki never realized how stressed he was until Thor held him this way. He never knew true peace until he was lying beside Thor.

“Or,” Thor continued, his voice tinged with drowsiness, “if you wish it, I will depose Laufey myself and give you your rightful kingdom.”

Loki giggled. “I may take you up on that offer.”

“And then—” Thor kissed Loki’s forehead, lingering for several long seconds “—I will take you as my bride and we will rule the Nine Realms together.”

“I am the bride? I believe you were the one who said you would wear a wedding dress if I gave it to you.”

Thor paused for a moment. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

“You did indeed.”

“Well, I can’t go back on a promise. That’s not very kingly.”

They were set to arrive in Laufey’s palace late the next morning. Thor and Loki were served their breakfast inside their tent; once the rest of the party had finished eating, they would head out.

Loki found he did not have much of an appetite, but he forced himself to eat regardless. He knew well how long these meetings could take, and he did not want to be distracted with hunger later on.

“I was thinking,” Thor said, “maybe you should wear the hairpin I got you. It’s of Jotun design; they might appreciate it.”

“I’d rather not call attention to myself,” Loki replied. “Besides, didn’t you tell me that it was a token of celebration for one’s heat cycle? I really don’t want to advertise that to a room full of Jotnar, thank you.”

“...I guess that’s a good point.” Thor looked thoughtfully down at his bowl. “I have decided that I am going with you, by the way.”

“Have you now?” Loki raised his eyebrows. “And what did your tutor say about that?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not letting you go in there alone.”

“You aren’t, are you?” Loki pursed his lips to hide his smile. “Very well. You will be bored senseless and you cannot fall asleep.”

“I won’t. All will be well, Loki.”

Loki wished he could say he felt the same. When they finished their meal and were called out by the Einherjar to start their trek over to the palace, he felt a sick twist in his gut as though everything he just ate was going to come back up. He stood up and patted down the front of his furs, then took a deep breath and stepped out of the tent.

There was a slight bit of arguing between Thor and the rest of the party once he announced his intent to accompany them, but Loki barely heard a word of it. He pulled off one of his gloves and checked his skin: still Aesir. He would have to be careful to touch as little as was possible. If there anything besides the Casket that could turn him Jotun again, it would be here in Jotunheim.

Eventually, they were on their way. Thor walked close beside Loki, flashing the occasional concerned look but saying nothing.

The palace of Jotunheim was only barely smaller than Asgard's. Carved and built right into the side of a cliff, the castle was made of nothing but stone and permafrost, as if it had stood a thousand years and would stand a thousand more. Loki felt his eyesight quickly adjusting to the dim light, as even when Jotunheim's sun rose it gave very little in the way of actual sunlight. There was a chill, as was to be expected, but Loki found it almost soothing. Certainly not deserving of the chattering teeth and grumbled cursing that surrounded him from the other Asgardians.

Loki checked the hand under his glove again. There was no blue yet. Not convinced, he checked the other hand, finding that one unchanged as well.

Thor's hand gently took hold of his, and Loki whipped his head up to look his brother in the eyes. Thor said nothing, but his expression was all that was needed.

You are fine, Brother. I am right here.

The party was greeted by two Jotun warriors at the front door of the palace. Loki could not help but gawk at them: he had never actually seen another Frost Giant save for pictures, but they were every bit as glorious as he had imagined.

The giants were nearly ten feet tall, though whether that was common or more to do with the fact that these two were obviously soldiers, Loki could not tell. Next to them, Loki felt like less of a runt and more like a flea. Just one could step on him and crush his ribs. They wore minimal clothing and armor, covering the vital organs but no more than was necessary. Their bodies were covered with the same ridged lines that Loki had painstakingly studied on himself, their skin hard and chapped against the freezing winds, and muscles bulging.

Somehow, these two made Thor look positively miniscule. Loki chanced to look at his brother and found Thor gaping as well. His eyes were scrutinizing every last inch of these Frost Giants, and Loki thought he could see a hint of...jealousy?

Loki smirked inwardly. *Envious that you have found a warrior bigger than yourself, Brother?*

Pleasantries and greetings were exchanged between the guards and the ambassadors. The party was shortly allowed entry into the palace, which Loki found surprisingly warm once they were inside.

Every wall was forged from solid, shimmering ice. At first glance it appeared to Loki like the palace was covered in mirrors, but another look told him otherwise. The ice was so pure and so clear, Loki could both see himself and also through to the other side. The light was dim, as it was outside, but filtered through blues and yellows and reds. The amount of color that the Jotnar managed to inject into the interior was truly astonishing. It was unbelievable to think that the palace never melted.

After being led through several corridors, they reached the council room where the day's proceedings would take place. Loki had been dreading the possibility that even Jotun furniture could be made of ice, but instead the table and chairs were made of stone. The chairs had furs and pillows as well to keep any guest of Jotunheim as comfortable as they could want. Keeping with the chromatic qualities of the outside hall, the upholstery and pillows were crocheted with the most brightly colored yarn Loki had ever seen. It brought a small smile to his face.

The ambassadors took their places around the table, and Thor chose the seat beside Loki. As he shuffled off his fur cloak, Thor reached down under the table to quickly grasp Loki's knee, giving it a quick squeeze and then letting go. Loki exhaled, feeling the race of his heartbeat begin to slow.

Loki did not pay attention to much else in the room until he heard the meeting start. The

Asgardians sat on one side of the table with the Jotun ambassadors on the other. Unlike the Aesir, who were bundled up mostly in gray and brown fur, the Jotnar wore very little save for what appeared to be some rather nice kilts, the belts of which were inlaid with gold and a few small jewels. Loki immediately noticed how most of the Frost Giants were eyeing Thor.

“We seem to have an extra guest,” one of them muttered. The giant’s voice rumbled low in his throat, his words sharp like glaciers breaking in the sea. He sat at the head of the table, across from Asgard’s head ambassador. Moreover, he was wearing significantly more golden jewelry—mostly bracelets, armbands, and a few hairpins—than the rest of them. Loki could only assume that this Jotun was in charge here.

Thor nodded and did not wait for any envoy to speak for him. “I have been traveling the Nine Realms with our ambassadors for the past several weeks,” he said, his voice unwavering and without a hint of nervousness. “I consider it a privilege to assist in the endeavor to bring peace between Asgard and Jotunheim once again.”

The Jotun who had spoken before looked impressed, raising an eyebrow as Thor spoke. “Very well, young prince,” he said. “Are you prepared to answer for the actions of All-Father Odin as if they were your own?”

Again, without a second of hesitation, Thor nodded. “I am. As the future king of Asgard I understand that I speak for all of my people here today. I would have you regain our trust.”

“We are a long way from trust. Odin All-Father took many things from us. And yet he claims to want peace with us, and does not even show up himself to answer for his crimes? Instead he sends his son?” The Frost Giant smirked. “A king who cannot, and will not, admit to his wrongs is no king at all.”

“Then are we to assume that Laufey has admitted to *his* wrongs?” Thor asked.

The room went uncomfortably silent for a moment. The Jotun ambassador blinked slowly and replied, “Make plain what you mean.”

“The attack on Midgard.”

“Which happened centuries ago. The people of Midgard do not even remember it.”

“The intent to take the rest of the Nine Realms by force,” Thor continued.

“Asgard has ruled the Nine Realms for eons. Power shifts, young prince. Old rulers fall and new ones take their place.”

“I agree. I will take Odin’s place sooner rather than later. I would have my Asgard be a better one for all the Nine Realms, Jotunheim included.”

The Jotun shrugged and sat back in his chair. “We shall see about that, young prince.”

Loki exhaled again. He hadn’t even noticed that he had been holding a breath. He glanced side-eyed at his brother, who was attempting to hold back a smile, or so it appeared. Loki pretended to stretch his arms under the table and gently grasped Thor’s knee, just as Thor had done for him, and pulled away again.

The rest of the proceedings was largely bureaucratic. The Asgardians laid out the subjects they intended to address with this visit, and the Jotnar responded with the topics that they wished to broach. There was not much call or need for Thor to interject again. Loki kept glancing over at

Thor all during the meeting, but Thor did not show any outward signs of disinterest or drowsiness. Surprisingly, he was weathering this much better than Loki expected him to.

After nearly four hours and several breaks, the ambassadors adjourned the meeting for the day. Loki gathered up the papers he had been taking notes on. They had barely gotten anywhere, and although that was typical for these first day meetings, Loki doubted they would get any farther no matter how long they stayed here. The ill will between Asgard and Jotunheim was too deep to be solved in a month by talking about it in a room somewhere.

By the time they reached their camp in the cavern again, Loki just felt like collapsing into a deep nap. He entered their tent and plopped himself straight onto his bed.

“I am *exhausted*,” he whined, curling himself up into a ball.

“How?” Thor laughed, pulling off his furs and throwing them to the floor. “You did nothing but sit in a room all day.”

Loki rolled onto his back and groaned. “I can already tell that we are going to get nowhere with the Frost Giants. Father has sent us on a fool’s errand.”

Thor knelt down beside Loki’s bed, folding his arms atop the blankets. “I highly doubt Father expects us to solve everything in just a month. Or however long we are to be here. I rather got the impression that we are just here to set a foundation for future progression.”

“Ugh,” Loki huffed.

Thor reached out and brushed some of Loki’s hair away from his face. “We will get through this, Brother. We might not be able to solve centuries of distrust right this moment, but we can at least start down the right path again.”

Loki rolled back onto his side to look Thor in the face. His brother was smiling so sweetly and with such optimism in his eyes. Loki didn’t understand it. He had never understood that about Thor, how he could see the good in everything no matter what. It didn’t make any sense; the world was not impressed by idealism and it did not solve anything. The world only understood strong and weak, alive and dead, the ruler and the ruled.

“Thor,” Loki demanded. “Kiss me.”

“I will if you sit up,” Thor replied patiently.

“I don’t take orders from you. Give me a kiss.”

Thor sighed and leaned forward, raising himself up on his knees, and pressed his lips to Loki’s. Loki’s tongue pushed Thor’s mouth open, sliding over everything he could touch, every place he could reach. He reached over and grabbed the back of Thor’s head, tangling his fingers in Thor’s golden hair, and pulled him close.

Thor’s strong hand was on Loki’s neck, kneading the skin gently with the calloused tips of his fingers. Loki felt his hand move down to unclasp the fur cloak, which Loki hadn’t yet bothered to remove, and Thor pulled the heavy garment aside.

Loki wished Thor would continue on, removing the rest of Loki’s clothes and then his own. It wasn’t safe here, though. Truth be told, it wasn’t safe anywhere. Home was good enough because they had a routine. Nobody bothered them as long as Thor and Loki were smart about things. But it wasn’t the same as not hiding.

Loki pulled away, ending the kiss, and stared into Thor's eyes. His brother looked slightly put off but not angry.

"I'm going to take a nap," Loki declared.

"All right." Thor placed another kiss on Loki's cheek. He pulled off Loki's boots and set them aside, then pulled the covers over his brother before kissing him once more. "I am going to see if I can make up some of the lessons I missed. I will be back for dinner."

Loki slept fitfully. Any moment that he managed to drift off, he was immediately awakened by some loud noises outside, or by his own thoughts, or nothing at all. Eventually he gave up on the nap and decided to practice further with his shapeshifting. He kept a clear eye on the flaps of the tent, ensuring he would be able to drop the glamour in time should anybody come snooping.

He did not see Thor again until dinner. Apparently Thor had gone with the Einherjar to hunt more meat, most of what they'd caught yesterday already gone. Loki did not have much of an appetite, but as usual, just being near Thor lifted his spirits enough to stay through most of the meal. Once the rest of the Asgardians began their usual drinking and celebrating and singing, Loki found the next appropriate moment to excuse himself.

Thor arrived in the tent about ten minutes after Loki. They had not been out of Asgard long, but already they had settled into a routine. In every realm save Alfheim they had been permitted to share chambers, and over time, certain actions became habit.

Loki would usually resign to their chambers first. Thor was never long after. After they prepped for sleep, donning their sleeping clothes and other such things—Loki had of course brought the clothes Thor had given him—they slipped into bed together without argument. If it had been a particularly draining day for one or both of them, they drifted off to sleep with no more than a few words spoken between them. Otherwise, they spent their time kissing, exploring each other's bodies, learning the hidden spots and secrets of one another.

It had only been a handful of weeks, but it had become so familiar that Loki could hardly remember things being any different between them.

Tonight was not one where they fell asleep quickly. Moments after Thor came under the sheets with him, he was on top of Loki, heaping adoration and worship upon Loki's face, his hands everywhere, searching for the spots that drove his brother mad, performing the rehearsed motions they had done so many times before.

Thor's hands so rarely ventured down between Loki's legs. He had, once, back Nidavellir, but for some reason Loki could not name he had stopped Thor immediately. They would have to face the reality of Loki's unfamiliar genitals one day or another. For now, Loki did not want to ruin what semblance of normalcy they had cobbled together.

On the other hand, Thor did not have any problem with Loki exploring the same area on him. Loki loved to slip his hand past the fabric of Thor's loose pants, gently grasping his cock, feeling it grow hard in his palm, studying every inch with as much diligence as he studied his magic. From time to time Loki's fingertips would brush against a spot that pulled a deep moan from Thor's mouth, and he memorized every one of them, filed them away, and knew he would never forget a single sound that his brother made.

Loki's hand was there now, playing with Thor's girth. He had no real intentions in mind past the

desire to feel it in his palm. Truth be told, he felt rather proud of Thor for how he had behaved at the ambassador meeting today. As Loki's fingertips ghosted over Thor's sensitive spots, Thor kissed him harder and stronger, groaning into Loki's mouth, his fingers gripping Loki's shoulders tighter with each passing second.

Loki squeezed Thor's cock a bit, beginning to pump it rhythmically. He had not planned to do such a thing, but it felt right, and it did not seem like Thor was complaining. Thor bucked into Loki's hand, pressing his chest down harder onto Loki's chest, his kisses coming faster and with more possessiveness. Loki slowed the speed of his hand, and Thor broke away for an instant, whining into the space between them, taking in deep, slow breaths. Loki reached up with his free hand and hooked it around Thor's neck, pulling him back down onto his mouth, where he belonged.

Thor managed to kiss Loki again for half a second before he broke away, gasping for air.

"Loki..." he said shakily, his hips twisting up into his brother's hand.

"Quiet," Loki commanded, entangling his fingers in Thor's hair. "I want to do this for you."

Thor's reply was some noise Loki had never heard before, but if this was what it took to draw such sounds from Thor, Loki would do it again and again, every night. Loki quickened his pace ever so slightly, his palm sliding up and down Thor's impressive length. His cock was so hard, and so *big*. Loki swallowed nervously, thinking of that girth penetrating him—more specifically, penetrating his woman's sex—filling him up from the inside out. Thor would be inside him, and Loki would, in that moment, share his brother's body. They would be *part* of each other then, like they were one person. So rarely did Loki imagine, or even wish for any sort of pleasure anywhere besides his own cock, but in that moment he wished to have Thor deep inside his other parts...his female parts. He wanted Thor to bed him the way he might bed a woman. It made him shiver with excitement; he had no idea what it might feel like, but he was desperate to find out.

Thor gasped again, the noise higher-pitched this time, and he curled in on himself, lowering his forehead to Loki's chest. Loki held the back of Thor's neck tighter, his other hand working faster. Thor's arms, which encircled him on either side, were shaking. Loki swallowed again, his head spinning. With one hand he had brought the mighty warrior prince of Asgard down to a shaking, disheveled mess. He smiled and squeezed Thor again, pumping with increasing speed.

As Thor's breaths came quicker and sharper, Loki slowed down just long enough to extract another needy whine from his brother.

"Loki..." Thor whimpered against his chest, "*please...*"

Loki rubbed his thumb *just so* over the head of Thor's cock, and was rewarded with a sharp cry and the spill of hot seed all over his fingers. Thor humped forward into Loki's palm a few times, riding out every last second of his finish, and then raised his head to look Loki in the face. Thor's face was fully flushed, beads of sweat falling from his bangs into his eyes.

"Where—" he stammered, swallowing hard, "where did you learn to do that?"

Loki shrugged, smiling cheekily. "It is not hard to figure out what you like, Brother."

Thor chuckled. "Fair enough."

Loki worked his hand out of Thor's pants. Thor rolled out of bed and went to retrieve a wet washcloth from another corner of the tent. He quickly cleaned up the mess he had made of himself, then returned to wipe up Loki's hand.

“Though it is a bit disconcerting,” Loki mused once Thor was finished and sliding back into bed beside him. “To think that the future king of Asgard can be brought to his knees by only a single hand.”

“Only your hand, Brother.” Thor kissed Loki’s forehead. “No other.”

“Then I will truly be the most powerful being in all the Nine Realms when you become king.”

Thor laughed softly. “Yes, I suppose you will.”

Loki frowned. There had been a hint of wistfulness in Thor’s tone that he did not like. “What?” he demanded.

“Nothing, I just....” Thor sighed and stared up at the ceiling of the tent. “I have gotten so used to...*this*. With you. When we return home....” He trailed off.

“When we return home *what*?” Loki asked. “We will continue as we always have. Unless you have grown tired of me?”

“Never, Loki, never.” Thor turned over and kissed Loki’s cheek. “I could never tire of you. You are the person I love most in all the world. It pains me to know that we can never marry.”

Loki felt his chest tighten. “Is...is that what you want?” he asked, blinking incredulously. “You wish to marry me?”

“Whatever you want to call spending the rest of my life with you, yes. I want that. It is why I made that bargain with you in the first place. I do not wish for you to ever leave my side.”

“...Sentiment,” Loki said. “Let’s not ignore reality, Brother. There is no situation in which Father would allow us to marry.”

“There is one,” Thor replied. “One day, many years from now, Father will no longer be here.” He paused, thinking on that truth. “We may do whatever we wish then.”

“A pipedream, I assure you.” Loki rolled over and flung his arm over Thor’s chest. “Let’s not worry about it just now.”

Chapter 10

The next few days of the ambassador meetings passed without incident or progress. Every day, they revisited old topics from the day before, talking in familiar circles until they came back around to where they started, and nothing at all had changed. Loki had ceased taking notes at this point, since he knew exactly how things would go. There was nothing to learn save the increasingly obvious fact that neither Asgard nor Jotunheim was truly interested in forging a new peace.

Even Thor was beginning to agree that there was only so much that could be done at this juncture. He spoke often during the meetings, but since he could not make any concrete promises the way Odin might have, there was very little change that he could effect. However, they had to keep trying.

Thor's attendance at the meetings meant that his lessons had to come later in the day. Which in turn meant that Loki could watch Thor at weapons' practice with more regularity. Loki sat in front of their tent, reading or looking over the notes from the day, listening to the sounds of Thor sparring with the other warriors. He found himself looking up more and more as he heard Thor win again and again, trying to hide his excitement at how effortlessly Thor knocked down every challenge thrown at him. The Einherjar who went up against him were hundreds of years more experienced, but it was no match for Thor's strength as he beat them down again and again. They did not appear to be holding back, either. It had become a game to them.

Thor fought in much the same way he did everything. With full force and immeasurable power, he beat his opponents down with raw strength more than anything. And yet he wasn't mindless. Thor was calculating and precise; he watched every foe, kept note of every possibility and every opening, and when he was overtaken in one moment he did not let it distract him. He accepted the blow, stood up again, and continued onward. He was like a storm in motion. Chaotic, loud, and everywhere, but not without reason.

Storms and wind had always answered to Thor. It was not magic, not in the way that Loki controlled things around him, but something else. The weather was just a part of him in a way Loki had never really understood. Despite his ability to call the rainclouds up at just a whim, Thor would never use that ability for anything but good. Loki never doubted that. Though he could have swept away the whole world before him in a berserker rage, such a thought had surely never crossed Thor's mind.

Loki had been especially impressed by watching Thor fight that day. Thor had gone up against three Einherjar at a time on a dare, and though he had been overtaken in the end, it had taken quite a bit of time. Even when he was finally defeated, Thor only laughed, congratulated the warriors on their prowess, and vowed to fight them again one day.

After dinner, once they were safely together in their tent, Loki latched onto Thor like his life depended on it, kissing Thor like he couldn't breathe unless he had air from Thor's lungs.

"Why so much affection, Brother?" Thor laughed, gently taking hold of Loki's hips and pushing him away.

"No reason," Loki replied, taking in a deep breath. "Do I need your permission?"

"No. But a warning would be nice."

“I’m growing so tired of this place. You are my only entertainment these days, and I cannot even indulge in you for more than a few hours at a time.” Loki stepped back and pouted.

Thor laughed again. “I am sorry.” He kissed Loki’s forehead. “I will make it up to you a thousand times over. In fact...I think I can make it up to you now.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Oh? And how is that?”

“I had been saving this for when our day comes around this month, but I see no reason why I shouldn’t treat you now.” Thor poked his head out of the front of the tent, and finding that the rest of the Asgardians were still preoccupied with their feasting and drinking, waved for Loki to follow him.

They went around behind the tent and deeper into the cavern. As the light dimmed, Loki squinted, feeling his low-light vision go to work. He glanced over to Thor, wondering how he knew where he was going, but his brother did not show any signs of stopping.

The cavern stretched much further back than Loki had expected. They walked nearly a mile in silence until Thor finally stopped, felt along the wall, and then led Loki into a narrow opening. Here, the light was beginning to return.

“How do you possibly know where you are going?” Loki asked, the question having been itching at him incessantly.

“I found this place while we were hunting the first day,” Thor explained, reaching back to grab Loki’s hand and help him over the more unstable ground. Perhaps it was being in such close proximity with Thor, but Loki could swear he felt the air around them growing warmer as well.

They went another few minutes in silence until the light returned in full force, and Thor brought Loki out into another cavern.

This one was smaller than the one in which they’d made their camp, but with an open ceiling, through which Jotunheim’s bright moonlight streamed in. The light fell upon a bright blue spring of water, steam rising in soft wisps from its surface.

“Oh,” Loki exclaimed, genuinely surprised. “I certainly never expected to see something like this here in Jotunheim.”

“Places like this are actually everywhere, according to what I’ve read,” Thor explained, beaming widely. He walked around the edge of the spring and sat down on a large rock, immediately kicking off his shoes. “I was hoping we’d get to find one when we came here, so I could show you.”

Loki nodded and went over to sit beside him. From here he could see up through the ceiling of the cavern and to the clear night sky. It had been snowing today, but the clouds had all disappeared by now. Regardless, the cavern was still warm, and Loki eventually wriggled out of his fur cloak. He leaned up against Thor, who put one arm around him and hugged him close.

“We will probably be in quite a bit of trouble for sneaking off like this,” Loki remarked.

“Probably,” Thor agreed. “But I feel as though they have learned to leave us alone.”

Loki felt a twinge of panic. “What do you mean? Do they...do they know? About us?”

“What? No, of course not! At least, I don’t think so.” Thor shrugged. “We have made enough of a

habit of staying in our tent for the night once we are in. I doubt anyone will think to check on us, since we are so consistent.” He flashed a grin at Loki, a gesture he surely thought was reassuring.

Loki sighed and put it out of his mind. It was difficult to worry when Thor said that things would be all right. He leaned in closer to Thor’s side and breathed in the mineral aroma from the water.

“I read that there is a spring like this deep in the palace of Jotunheim,” Thor said. “And that it’s a very significant place...it is where the royal family goes to marry, it is where they pray to their gods, and when a child is born they clean the infant in those waters.” He turned his head, looking at Loki. “You were probably born in a place quite similar to here.”

“Hmm,” Loki replied noncommittally. “I wonder if that is when they decided to toss me away, since I was such a runt and all that.”

“Well,” Thor said, leaning in close to press a soft kiss to Loki’s cheek, “if they had not, then I would not be here with you now. No matter the circumstances that brought us here, I am glad you are my brother, Loki. I am proud to have grown up beside you, and I am proud to love you.”

Loki chuckled. “You are getting a bit better with your romantic side.”

“Am I?”

“A *bit*.”

Thor laughed, and then was silent for a bit longer before saying, “Although...I do wonder sometimes...if you were meant to be a bringer of peace between the realms, we might still have met. Had Father not brought you home.”

“Might we?” Loki said, raising an eyebrow in amusement. “You suppose that I would have been your Jotun betrothed, the two of us destined to marry since birth?”

“Well, maybe! It’s not that out of the question, is it?”

“Let me think.” Loki stroked his chin in mock contemplation, staring up to the ceiling. “Yes. Yes, it is completely out of the question.”

“Then I am glad that we met this way.” Thor embraced Loki around his waist, holding him tight. “I would not change a thing.”

“I have a large list of things I would change.”

“Come, Brother.” Thor leapt to his feet and pulled off his shirt. “Let’s see how the water feels.”

Loki rested his elbows on his knees, his chin in his palm, and watched Thor disrobe with a faint smile. He was getting a bit more used to his brother’s body, more familiar with the contours, lines, and muscles. When Thor shuffled out of his pants, and Loki saw his cock hanging free, the blood rushed to Loki’s face and he smiled wider. Thor wore absolutely nothing save for the Mjolnir necklace around his throat.

Thor slipped into the water and let out a heavy sigh. “Loki, it feels amazing! Won’t you come in?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Of course I do. If you want I’ll turn around while you take your clothes off.”

Loki smirked and stood up. “Now that is something I *know* you don’t want.”

Quickly, before he could talk himself out of it, Loki pulled his shirt up and over his head, tossing it atop his fur cloak on the ground. Already Thor's eyes were locked on his body, his face growing redder for reasons very different than the heated water surrounding him. Loki struggled not to watch his face, as the glowing adoration and intensity in Thor's expression was unnerving him deeply. He had no cause to believe that Thor would ever try anything without his permission, yet Loki was so unused to the type of look in Thor's eyes. He couldn't say he liked it very much; how could somebody look on a body as undesirable as his own with such affection?

Somehow, he managed to take off every last piece of his clothing. Just before stepping into the water, Loki stopped, seizing up with unbidden anxiety. Countless months after he and Thor had begun this—whatever it was they were fooling around with—he was finally standing before his brother, fully naked, allowing him to see everything.

It was not the first time they had been naked together, but in those moments Loki had been under a blanket and in the dark. Now there was no hiding. The redness in Thor's face was a far deeper shade than could be attributed to the steam of the spring alone. Thor was silent, his mouth slightly parted, as his eyes fixated on each part of Loki's body with utter fascination.

Compared to Thor's body—a sheer work of art—Loki's was smaller, less imposing, full of lean, wiry muscle. His veins had always been easily visible through his pale skin, but if it disgusted Thor, he gave no such sign. Loki watched, swallowing nervously, as Thor's eyes moved across his chest, down to his slender stomach. Loki had always thought he had curves like a woman, and took *some* pride in that, though he would never admit it out loud. Eventually, Thor's bright blue gaze was focused on the genitals between Loki's legs. Loki's face burned hotter as Thor stared, unblinking, at Loki's cock and the distinct lack of balls behind them. The look on Thor's face was one of pure curiosity, almost *hunger*. There was no fear, no revulsion, not even a trace of disinterest in Thor's eyes. He was utterly, completely smitten.

It was not quite as frightening as Loki had imagined it to be.

After a moment, however, he realized that he was just standing there, staring at Thor, who was staring back at him, complete silence all around them.

“Well?” Thor asked quietly, his grin growing wider. “Are you coming in?”

“Of course,” Loki huffed, placing one foot in the warm water. “Just give me a second.”

He sunk slowly into the spring, sighing out with relief as the heat penetrated every inch of his body. He hadn't realized just how cold he had been this whole time. The chill of Jotunheim had become commonplace, but even though his body was equipped to handle the low temperatures, it was a sweet reprieve.

Loki dunked his head under the water, lingering there for a moment before coming back up for air. The hot spring did not have a pleasant smell, but—much like Thor, who also did not have a pleasant smell—Loki found that he liked it.

“This is nice,” Loki said as Thor swam over to him. “I didn't think Frost Giants would care for heat like this.”

“Well, you always have.” Thor grinned. “You have been known to spend literal *hours* in the baths, Brother.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “And *you*, for whatever reason, have always had an aversion to cleanliness.”

Thor swam behind him and put his arms around Loki's waist, pulling him in for a tight hug. The heat of the water and Thor's chest against his back sent shivers through Loki's entire body. Thor was nuzzling into his neck, as he so often did; Loki was beginning to think of that spot as belonging to Thor. Thor had certainly left his share of bruises on Loki's neck, and though they were easily concealed with magic or clothing, Loki wished he didn't have to.

"I'll build you a castle around this spring," Thor said in between kisses. "And keep you here forever."

"I don't think Laufey would take kindly to you building on his land," Loki replied, pretending that the kisses didn't affect him in the slightest.

"I will give him back the Casket in exchange."

"You just want somewhere to keep me locked up like your favorite toy," Loki huffed.

"Loki, that's not what I meant," Thor said hastily, hugging him tighter. "I just want somewhere that's just for us. Somewhere neither Father nor Laufey cares about, or knows about."

"You know," Loki said, twisting around in Thor's grip to face him, "there's no reason why we couldn't just leave. Right now."

Thor's face fell. "Yes, there's a perfectly good reason why we can't, Brother, and you know it too. You and I cannot abandon Asgard."

"*You* can't. *I* can do whatever I want."

"I have responsibilities and so do you."

"So you admit that you love Asgard more than me?" Loki frowned. "I should have guessed."

"Stop putting words in my mouth." Thor scowled, but looked more hurt than angry. "I cannot break rules as easily as you."

"We will fix that." Loki leaned forward, kissing Thor slowly, pushing his tongue back deep into his brother's mouth. He did not know Thor's mouth as well as Thor knew his, but he knew it well enough. Enough to push into Thor's lips just so, enough to slide his tongue in just the right spots, touch the side of Thor's face in just the right way to draw the low groans out of him. Since coming to Jotunheim, Thor hadn't shaved his face at all, and the permanent stubble was growing into a respectable beard.

Loki pulled away and dragged his fingertips across Thor's rough whiskers. "It's coming in nicely," he said.

"It is?" Thor asked, his eyes lighting up. He was breathing a little faster, his face flushed from the water and the heat of his brother. "Do you like it?"

"I do. You should keep it."

"I will." Thor nodded eagerly and grinned.

Loki had never been able to grow a beard of his own. He had been jealous, of course, but after a while learned to stop caring. Now that they were here among Frost Giants, he realized that he hadn't seen a single Jotun with any facial hair whatsoever. Perhaps it was in his Jotun blood. Beards and facial hair were an Aesir thing, once again another thing that Loki simply could not do.

But he didn't mind it so much. He liked feeling the rough scratchiness of Thor's whiskers against his own bare skin. It left a pleasant rawness that he could not get enough of.

"We'll be all right, Loki," Thor said suddenly, embracing his brother tight and nuzzling into his spot on Loki's neck.

You can't know that. You can't promise that. Loki kept the words to himself for now. He wrapped his arms around Thor's head and gently pulled him in closer, urging him to bite the skin.

As Thor acquiesced to his silent request, Loki saw his hands beginning to change color.

"*What—*" he sputtered, pushing Thor away. The raised lines reappeared on his arms, the deep blue color settling deep into his skin. Loki touched his chest and glanced down through the water, seeing that his legs and torso had begun the change as well.

"Well, look at that," Thor declared, smiling, looking his brother up and down and taking in the sight of him.

"By the *Norns*, this is irritating," Loki grumbled, staring at the palms of his hands. He reached up, feeling the nubs of his horns, and groaned. "What did you do, Thor?"

"I didn't do anything! It is probably just the water, Loki."

"I have drunk the water and eaten the food of this place and none of it has had such a disgusting effect."

Thor shrugged. "I told you, these springs are sacred to the Jotnar. It's not altogether out of the question to assume there is some latent magic here, is there?"

Loki sank halfway beneath the water, the surface line cutting across the bridge of his nose. He glared at Thor, hoping his eyes were redder than usual, and more frightening. It only made Thor smile wider.

"Why are you sinking down?" Thor asked, wading closer. "I want to see."

Loki responded by spitting a mouthful of water directly into Thor's face. "You're insatiable," he said.

Thor wiped his face and grinned darkly. "Do you really want to play this game, Brother?"

"This is no *game*, I'm—" Loki was cut off as Thor placed his hand on Loki's head and dunked him effortlessly under the water. Loki wriggled his way back to the surface and sucked in a deep breath of air.

"*Thor!*" he shouted, ignoring the laughter. "I could have *drowned!*"

"You were *fine*, Brother, always so dramatic!"

Loki slapped the water, sending a wave in Thor's direction, and grinned in satisfaction when most of the water ended up in Thor's open mouth.

"This is why we weren't allowed to take baths together," Loki sneered. "You always made such a mess."

"*I made the mess?*" Thor asked, incredulous. "Your memory is poor. I believe *you* were the one constantly splashing, saying, 'Mother, Thor won't stop touching me!'" He laughed aloud. "Most of

the bathwater ended up on the floor! I believe there was an inch or two of it.”

“You are such a liar! Don’t you remember?” Loki sank his head underwater and then burst up, arms raised, splashing water everywhere. “RAWR! ‘Look, Mother, I’m Jormungand the serpent!’ Now who does that sound like!?”

“Oh gods, I did used to do that.” Thor covered his face in embarrassment, though Loki could still see him laughing.

“And then—” Loki continued, wading closer.

“No, I remember!”

“*And then*, you grabbed my toy boat and you broke it in half just like that!” Loki smacked the water again. “And when Mother scolded you, you said that it wasn’t you, it was the serpent, and you had to be a serpent the right way.”

“Ugh.” Thor pulled his hands away, the grin still wide on his face. “I *did* get you another boat, though. Mother made me.”

“No you didn’t,” Loki replied, scowling.

“Yes I did!”

“I never had another toy boat for as long as I lived. You are making that up.”

“When we return home, ask Mother! She will tell you that I *did* get you a new one.”

Loki frowned, truly not remembering. In the end, he shrugged and waded away to the edge of the pool. “If you say so, Brother.”

Thor followed him, floating beside him and looking up through the open ceiling. The sky was clear and the stars were bright, though Loki did not recognize any of the constellations here. He hadn’t given it any thought before, but he supposed it made sense that the stars should be different in different realms.

“You seem a bit more comfortable with your form these days,” Thor remarked. Loki had been practicing his shapeshifting whenever they had a few hours to themselves; he had been getting better with regards to how his body was supposed to look. Thor had watched him do it enough times that he could hardly tell the difference between the glamour and this. Now that the spring’s transformation of his body was complete, Thor could see that Loki’s horns had grown a bit since last he’d taken this form in earnest. He made a mental note of it, so he could remind Loki later.

Loki shrugged again, tracing the raised lines on the back of his hand. “I have tried to accustom myself to it. I had hoped that you would accustom yourself as well.”

“I’m getting more and more used to it.” He paused. “You know...this actually gives us a solution to our little problem.”

“And what problem would that be?”

“You had asked me...to make love to you while you appear Jotun,” Thor said, his voice growing softer.

Loki glanced over at him, his heart momentarily beating faster. “I did.”

“Well, if you are ready....”

“I am,” Loki said, nodding tightly. “I am ready...but not tonight. It’s...it’s a bit sudden now.” He huffed. “I was not expecting *this* to happen.”

“I understand. But we can come here as often as you like.” Thor smiled. “And we may be in Jotunheim for a while.”

Loki nodded again. He hesitated a moment, then shuffled closer to Thor, placing his head on Thor’s shoulder. Thor reached out and pulled Loki closer to him, pressing his chest up against Loki’s back.

“...I’m glad you came with us,” Loki murmured quietly.

“As am I.” Thor kissed the top of Loki’s head. One thing he was grateful for was that Loki’s hair stayed the same whether he appeared Aesir or Jotun. It still had the same floral scent, the same softness, the same silky darkness. “You are beautiful, you know. I don’t know how I did not see it before.”

Loki felt the blood rush to his face. “Shut up with that,” he mumbled.

“No. You need to hear it. Over and over, until the end of time, until you believe it.” Thor kissed him again. “I will tell you that I love you every hour of every day if that is what it takes.”

I suppose that wouldn’t be so bad, Loki thought to himself. Aloud, he said, “We should probably not linger here too much longer. It wouldn’t be *proper* to have somebody stumble upon the crown prince of Asgard naked in a spring with a Frost Giant.”

“I will say it is part of our diplomacy,” Thor replied cheekily. “To get into the good graces of Jotunheim I must know *all* about the Jotnar.” His hand slipped under the water and between Loki’s legs, his fingers brushing against Loki’s cock.

Loki inhaled sharply, his heart beating faster, and when Thor’s strong palm surrounded him, Loki gasped. Thor’s palm was gentle but firm, pumping him slowly, and Loki gradually lowered his head back onto Thor’s shoulder. Pleasure was seeping up his cock to overtake all of his nerves, driving out any trace of embarrassment or apprehension. Thor continued pressing kisses to Loki’s face, every place he could reach, his other arm wrapping around Loki’s waist to hold him close. Loki could feel Thor’s own hardened cock pressed against his back, sending a surge of ecstasy up his spine.

He practically melted into Thor’s arms, just letting himself feel close to him, allowing himself to trust him. It felt so good to just have him there, close and intimate, so familiar and yet so new at the same time. They’d been together so many times and yet never quite like this.

Thor’s fingers were exploring all up and down Loki’s length, and then slowly, cautiously, Thor’s fingertips reached underneath Loki’s cock and to the folds Loki himself had barely ever touched.

Loki took in a sharp breath and Thor stopped. “I’m sorry,” Thor murmured.

“No, you’re fine. It just surprised me, is all.”

Thor hesitated, but then slowly slipped one finger between the lips. He did not go far, or deep, but instead lightly rubbed his fingertip up and down Loki’s entrance. His calloused pad scraped lightly against Loki’s clit, and Loki took in another sharp breath, and without thinking, spread his knees just the slightest bit wider.

Thor's hand stopped. Loki lifted his head and looked his brother in the eye. He could not read the expression on Thor's face.

"...Do you think I'm a freak?" Loki asked quietly.

Thor shook his head. "Not in the slightest," he replied. "I was just...thinking...about all the things I want to do to you."

"Oh?" Loki raised an eyebrow, feeling the blood rushing down between his legs. "What things?"

"Everything." Thor's eyes were fixated on Loki's face, like there was nothing else to see but him, like there was nothing else he craved as deeply as him. Thor's tongue flicked out past his lips for just an instant, and he moved closer to speak directly into Loki's ear.

"I want you in every way that you will allow it," he said. "I have never laid with another before, but I feel like I would know exactly what to do with you. Please, Brother...promise me that we will come back here, you and me, and I promise that I will love you in all the ways that I've wanted to for so long."

"Of course," Loki replied, nodding to hide the shudder running through him. "Of course."

Thor softly kissed Loki's cheek, breathing in deep as he pulled away. "I promise I will do right by you, Brother."

"I am sure you will." Loki paused, coming back to himself a bit now that Thor's hand had stopped pleasuring him. "But for now we should go back to the camp before anybody notices we are gone."

Thor exhaled. "If you say so."

Loki lifted himself out of the water, grimacing at the sight of his blue body. Thor followed shortly after.

"How am I supposed to get dry?" Loki whined, sitting on a nearby rock.

"Just use your furs to pat yourself down until we get back," Thor replied. "When we get back to bed you can take it all off again."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Thor only grinned in response. "Well, you'd better put *something* on, if you don't want everybody to see you as you are."

Chapter 11

By the time they made their way back to the tent, Loki's Jotun form had not dissipated in the slightest. Loki had fretted over it for a moment, but Thor had reassured him that it would go away with time. Before Loki could complain any further, he found himself pressed beneath his brother in their bed, Thor's familiar lips on his, and all worries melted away.

As Thor had said, Loki woke up the next day with no traces of blue on his skin.

Over the next few days, they made trips back to the spring when they could, contenting themselves with their tent when they could not. So far they had been able to avoid any suspicion from the rest of the party, but Loki was growing increasingly worried that such a thing would not last for long.

They discovered that the spring triggered Loki's Jotun form for much longer than the Casket. It would be a good few hours before the blue began to fall away, and so Thor took care to cover Loki up as much as possible when it was time for them to head back to the camp. So far, all had been well. They curled up in bed together, Loki drawing body heat from Thor, and Thor reveling in the pleasant chill of Loki's skin.

Thor continued to accompany Loki and the ambassadors to the palace each day. So far, all that had been accomplished was a list of the "most pressing" subjects that both sides agreed needed to be addressed before the Asgardians left. The Jotnar were most insistent that they receive the Casket of Ancient Winters back unconditionally. The Asgardians, however, were less willing to budge in that regard.

Today was the beginning of their third week in Jotunheim. In the conference room, Thor took his usual spot next to Loki. As the ambassadors took their seats as well, Loki noticed the Jotnar murmuring amongst themselves, many of them smiling and looking somewhat excited.

As the meeting began, Hymir, the head envoy of Jotunheim said, "I apologize, but we're going to have to keep today's meeting short."

"What for?" Thor asked, genuinely curious.

"If you must know, today is a holiday. Many of us have preparations to make for a festival we are having later tonight, and would like to spend time with their families." The Jotun appeared to intend his words to be dismissive, yet Thor's eyes lit up.

"What kind of a holiday?" he asked, leaning forward a bit. "I haven't heard of this. What are you celebrating?"

A hush fell over the room. Loki glanced around and saw the Asgardian ambassadors staring in confusion at their prince. Hymir looked equally as puzzled.

"Ah..." he said, "it is the Lights Festival. The aurora will be at its peak tonight."

"Oh, the Northern Lights!" Thor exclaimed. "We have those in Asgard too! There's really only a few places you can see them clearly from, though. The mountains are too high, or it's too cloudy, it's always *something*, you know?"

Hymir cleared his throat. "I suppose." He paused. "There are...quite a few good spots to view them here."

“And you said it’s tonight? I’ll have to watch for them. How do you know that tonight is going to be their peak?”

“They are easy enough to predict.”

“Really? I shall read up on that.” Thor smiled at the Jotun, who only narrowed his eyes further, entirely uncertain of what to make of him.

“Well then,” said the ambassador, after a moment of silence. “Shall we get started?”

Even though the meeting was cut short, as requested, they made a surprising amount of progress. The ambassadors agreed to begin taking steps towards reopening trade between Asgard and Jotunheim, a topic that had been a point of contention for days now. The details would be saved for tomorrow, but now that they finally had landed on something both sides could agree on, the meeting broke with a renewed feeling of confidence all around.

As Loki was putting his cloak back on, he noticed Thor slip around to the other side of the table. Thor pulled the Jotnar’s head ambassador aside and was speaking with him in quiet tones. Due to the flurry of activity around him, Loki could not hear their conversation, but the ambassador was doing a lot of nodding and Thor was talking more animatedly than usual.

Eventually, Thor’s smile spread across his face and he shook the Jotun’s hand. Loki could swear he saw the ghost of a smile on the Frost Giant’s face as well.

Thor came back over and said, “Loki, I just spoke to Hymir, I asked him if you and I could come to the city after the meeting to see what the festival is like.”

Loki groaned. “Thor, I don’t want to do that. Why didn’t you ask me first?”

“Yes you do!” Thor insisted. He lifted his hand and for a brief, heart-stopping moment, Loki could have sworn that Thor was about to kiss him right in the middle of this room. Yet, Thor caught himself, playing it off coolly and instead redirecting his hand to run through his own hair.

“Come on,” Thor continued. “We’re going to go back to the camp first, and bring one of the ambassadors with us, and then we’re meeting them outside of the palace.”

Loki sighed. “Very well.”

On the way back to the camp, Thor was speaking with the ambassador in charge, trying to convince him to come to the city with them as well. As they walked, Loki heard a jumble of laughter behind him.

“...told me all Jotnar were colorblind, why do they give two shits about the aurora...”

“...can you imagine, though, what the hell do Frost Giants even *do* to celebrate?”

“Who knows, I bet they probably eat snowballs or something stupid like that....”

“I heard that when Frost Giants fuck they cum icicles.”

“Why would you say that? Can you imagine mounting one of the women, and finding all that slush up there?”

“Ha! *Women*, you say, as if you can even tell the difference.”

Loki grit his teeth but said nothing. By the time they arrived back at the cave, the gossiping

Einherjar had not let up in the slightest. Thor had finished his conversation with the ambassador, and turned back to Loki with excitement all over his face.

“All right, Loki, I’m going to go grab some things and then—what’s the matter?” Thor’s face fell immediately, his expression going frantic.

“Nothing is the matter,” Loki snapped. “But I’m not going to your stupid festival so have fun without me.”

Thor looked hurt, searching Loki’s face and wracking his brain for something to say. The two Einherjar guards passed by them, laughing louder now.

“Are you serious?” one of them laughed. “They have *both* parts!?”

“It’s true! I swear it!”

“So Laufey is actually a king and a queen all in one?”

Thor’s eyes grew dark and he whipped his head around, and shouted, “*You two!*”

The guards stopped immediately and scrambled back towards Thor. “Yes, Your Highness?” the taller of them asked.

“What were you discussing just now?”

Loki watched in stoic fascination as Thor’s face grew red, the telltale signs of rage plain on his brow. It was the look Thor had just as he was about to go in for the kill during weapons training.

“Nothing, Your Highness,” the guard lied, shaking his head. “Just...discussing rumors, is all.”

“Seems to me you were having yourselves a nice laugh at the expense of our hosts.”

The entire camp had gone quiet, all eyes on the three of them. The Einherjar shuffled and glanced at each other nervously.

“Ah...just a bit of fun, my prince,” the shorter guard said, smiling weakly. “We meant no harm by it.”

“Perhaps you didn’t receive the notice when you were assigned on this journey, but our mission here is diplomacy and peace. If it is too much trouble for you to treat others with a bit of decency and respect, perhaps you’d like to be sent back to Asgard right this minute and explain to the All-Father yourselves how you have failed in your duty.”

The Einherjar instantly dropped to one knee. “Please, Your Highness,” said the tall one. “We meant no disrespect. We are truly sorry.”

“It’s not me to whom you owe your apology,” Thor replied, staring down at them with disgust.

“The two of you will collect the firewood for the night. *Just* the two of you.” Thor looked up and around at the rest of the Asgardians. “And if I hear another disparaging word against our hosts—in *any* realm—I will personally send that person home to Asgard to explain themselves to my father.”

The Einherjar nodded wordlessly, then rose to their feet and shuffled slowly out the cavern entrance. The rest of the Asgardian party went back to what they were doing without making eye contact. Satisfied, Thor headed towards his tent, Loki following a respectable distance behind.

“You must be feeling bold,” Loki remarked as he entered after his brother.

Thor shrugged. “If we truly care about rebuilding relations with Jotunheim, then I won’t abide that sort of talk.”

“Hmm.” Loki sat down on the edge of his bed, watching Thor as he changed his shirt into something less formal. “I doubt everyone out there is willing to put in the work that you did in an attempt to change.”

“That is why I must correct them,” Thor said, pulling a plain red shirt over his head. “Come on, Loki, change into something else. You’re coming with me whether you like it or not.”

“Oh, am I?”

“Yes. And if you don’t move quickly I will pick out something for you.”

“You absolutely will not. Thor, do not touch my things.”

Thor went over to Loki’s trunk and threw open the top, rifling through the meticulously folded clothes for something more comfortable.

“Are you hard of hearing!?” Loki exclaimed, jumping to his feet. Thor tossed a green shirt into his face.

“There,” Thor declared, grinning. “Now get dressed before I dress you myself.”

Despite Thor’s angry protests that it would send the wrong message, the ambassadors refused to let him and Loki go to the Jotun city without a guard. They sent along one Einherjar—a different guard than the two who Thor had reprimanded earlier—with the promise that the utmost respect would be given for the Jotun holiday. Not without some extra grumbling, Thor had agreed to it.

“I’m just here to protect you, Your Highness,” the Einherjar explained with a crooked smile. “It is no different than what any other realm would do for their royalty.”

“I know, I know,” Thor sighed. He, Loki, and the guard were on their way to the Jotunheim palace, where they would meet the Jotun ambassador from that morning. “I just don’t want to appear as though I regard them as a threat.”

“Stop complaining, Brother,” Loki said, nudging him. “The Jotnar would do no less if Laufey wanted to roam the streets of Asgard.”

They arrived at the door to the palace, where Hymir was already waiting for him. The Jotnar did not appear to regularly wear much clothing besides a leather-and-fur loincloth, though the ambassador appeared before them wearing a multi-colored sash across his chest along with the usual garb.

“Oh good, I’m glad you’re here!” Thor exclaimed as they approached. The ambassador narrowed his eyes.

“Did you think that I would not show for some reason?”

“I—no, no, of course not! My apologies. I am just...very excited to witness this piece of Jotun culture. I am afraid I’m ignorant on a lot of your customs.”

“Most realms are.” The Jotun sighed through his nose and then turned, gesturing for them to

follow. "There is an easier entrance to the city inside. Come along."

Thor walked alongside Hymir, but Loki hung back just a bit. He kept staring at the Jotun's sash, at all the multi-colored designs, evocative of a curtain of aurora lights.

"That's, um..." he said, "quite an impressive decoration you have."

The Frost Giant turned his head and looked down at Loki, his red eyes piercing. For a breathless moment Loki felt as though this Jotun could see through the glamour to Loki's true form. For an even more frightening instant, Loki wished he could show this Frost Giant what he truly looked like, just to see how he would react.

Instead, the Jotun replied, "Thank you. My daughter made it for me."

"Really!" Thor said, taking a closer look. "Did she dye it too?"

"Of course." Hymir sighed. "You may or may not have noticed, but it's very monochrome here in Jotunheim. Any opportunity to see a spot of color that isn't white is greatly appreciated."

"I think it's a beautiful mix of color," Thor remarked. "Our queen mother would probably enjoy something like it."

"Well...there will likely be a few things for sale in the city. Perhaps you will find something that your Aesir mother will like."

The Jotun city was magnificent. Loki had never seen anything like it in any of their books at home. The festival was taking place mainly in the city square, centered on an enormous ice-and-stone statue of a Frost Giant he did not recognize. Hymir explained that it was the founder of the city, and through all the centuries that the statue had stood, the ice had never melted. People had hung more of the colored sashes on the statue, and large flags and banners were being flown from vendors' stalls and storefronts.

What caught Loki's attention the most, however, were the flowers. Numerous carts and baskets had been set up near the center statue selling the most brightly colored blossoms Loki had ever seen. They were more beautiful than the flowers in Vanaheim or Asgard, more beautiful than the ones grown and tended to by the expert gardeners back home.

Loki reached over and tugged at Thor's sleeve. "Brother," he said, pointing at the baskets, "we should...buy some of those for Mother."

"We should," Thor agreed, grinning. He knew what Loki had truly meant.

Thor turned back to Hymir and said, "Would it be all right if my brother and I had a look around?"

The Frost Giant shrugged. "I suppose. I trust you'll make no trouble."

"Not a bit."

The Jotun festival was among one of Loki's favorite things he had ever experienced. Unlike Asgardian celebrations, which were frequently loud, brash, and explosive, the Frost Giants seemed to prefer their festivity more subdued. The gaudy, colorful banners and sashes were absolutely

everywhere, with some of the younger Jotnar wearing enough of them to cover their entire body. Many people passing by were eating food sold from the vendors' carts; Loki could see meat, not unlike the food that the Einherjar had caught for their own food, a variety of breads and pastries, and a few young giants eating what appeared to be snow flavored with multi-colored fruit syrup. He wanted to try them all. When he conveyed as much to Thor, Loki found himself with one of absolutely everything within moments.

They passed stores selling everything from jewelry to furs to toys. Loki wanted everything he saw. He knew that Thor would gladly buy anything he asked for, so he waited until he saw something that he had absolutely *had* to have before abusing that particular power.

The Jotun jewelry was beautiful, in Loki's mind far superior to anything created by the Nidavellir dwarves. Together Thor and Loki agreed on a pair of earrings to bring home to Frigga, and Loki found a golden necklace inlaid with emeralds and sapphires that he could not put down. That found its way into the bag along with the earrings as well.

It was unspoken, but Loki knew that Thor would be watching out to ensure nothing triggered Loki's Jotun form unexpectedly. Loki obsessively checked every few minutes beneath his gloves, but so far he seemed to be in the clear.

Thor was looking at a collection of hunting knives for sale when Loki saw the bookstore. Loki tugged on Thor's sleeve and did not even wait for a response before he ran off. When he entered the store, there was nobody inside save a bored-looking Jotun who was staring wistfully out the window at the customers she was not receiving.

When Loki entered, she perked up immediately, but upon seeing that he was not Jotun, raised an eyebrow.

"Um...hello?" she said. "Are you one of the Asgardians?"

Yes and no. "I am Prince Loki of Asgard," he said with a brief swell of pride. "I saw your store and thought I'd come have a look."

The Jotun sighed and sat back in her seat. "Go right ahead. I was just about to just give up and close down for the day."

Loki frowned. "Why is that?"

"Well as you can clearly see I'm *overrun* with customers right now," she replied, gesturing to the empty building. She sighed again, heavier this time. "Take a look at whatever you like."

Thor entered the store just then. He looked around at the towering bookshelves and a grin broke out across his face. "I should have known what would make you run off like that, Loki," he said.

The Jotun raised both eyebrows. "Not a single customer in three weeks and the first two I see are the princes of Asgard. There is truly nothing predictable in this world."

Thor frowned. "Three weeks? That can't be good for your business."

"I see they're quite astute in Asgard." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Yes, I can do the math, little prince. Like I told your brother here, have a look at whatever you like."

"I'd be more than happy to buy something if it would help," Loki offered.

The Jotun laughed sharply. "I'm afraid it's too late even for that. I haven't turned a profit in the last

year. You'd have to pay double what my entire stock is worth to help me out."

Loki glanced at Thor. "Well," he said, "I will take a look around and see what I can do."

The Jotun watched them impassively as Loki took Thor's hand and led him further back into the store.

For the next two hours, Thor and Loki pored over every book they could find. There was so much here that they would have never found in Asgard's vast archives. Histories, stories, maps, lineages, and anything else they could have wanted to know about Jotunheim and its history. Loki sat in the back of the store, flipping through page after page, unable to read it all fast enough, while Thor ran back and forth from bookcase to bookcase, bringing Loki back handfuls of books every time until a wall of literature surrounded Loki on all sides.

After some time, the Jotun walked back to check on them. Her eyes widened at the mess. "What—what are you doing?" she exclaimed. "Do you know how long it will take me to put all of this back!?"

"There won't be any need," Loki replied, not looking up from his current book. "These are all the ones I'm buying."

"I beg your pardon?"

Loki looked up and gestured to the mountain of books. "This is my Want pile. I'm buying these."

The Frost Giant blinked, then cleared her throat. "Well," she said, "that's very nice and all, but it still won't save my business."

"That's fine. Because I am going to pay all of your debt for you."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Is this some kind of Asgardian humor? The very prince of Asgard comes into *my* worthless shop and wants to give me a fortune?"

"This shop isn't worthless," Loki said, getting to his feet. "There's more here than what we have in Asgard."

The Jotun narrowed her eyes. "And why are you so interested in our history, young prince? What does Asgard care about Jotunheim?"

Loki pursed his lips and cast his eyes down. He wanted, so badly, to tell her the truth. To tell her that he was her kin, that he cared because it was all a part of him. But he could not. There was no telling how she might respond. Loki knew better than to trust anybody, least of all strangers.

It struck him then how profoundly he did not truly belong to either Asgard or Jotunheim. He had always known of course, but even here, in the privacy of a tiny store, it was better to lie than to show somebody who he really was.

Loki was unprepared to hear Thor speak. "We've learned a great deal about your realm since our coming here," Thor said. "Enough to show us how woefully ignorant we are about all that Jotunheim is. I can't undo all the centuries of hurt we have done to you, but I'd like to at least work towards a better future for both our realms."

The Frost Giant raised an eyebrow, searching Thor's face for any sign of insincerity. "You're an idealistic one, aren't you?"

“In some ways, I guess,” Thor replied with a smile. “I just know that Asgard can do better. As its future king, *I* can do better.”

“Hmm. You have an attitude that’s rare in leaders these days. I don’t dislike it.”

Thor grinned wider. “Your shop has made me and my brother very happy. I’ll do what I can to ensure you continue to stay in business, and we’ll come back in a few months to see how you are doing.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, considering the offer. After a moment, she shrugged. “I’m already set to lose everything. I suppose I have nothing to lose by agreeing.”

“Excellent!” Thor extended a hand, and the Frost Giant shook it. Her skin was smooth and cool, not unlike Loki’s. “Might I ask your name, my lady?”

She smirked at the overly formal address. “It’s Hroðr.”

“Lovely! I suppose I’ll go ahead and pay for these then.”

It took a few trips and some assistance from the Einherjar guard who had accompanied them—they found him later surrounded by Jotun children who were heaping flowers upon him—but Loki and Thor managed to bring all the books back to their camp.

They filled an entire corner of their tent, and they ended up having to split storage of the books between Loki’s luggage, Thor’s, and that of a few willing ambassadors.

Much to Loki’s surprise and glee, the Einherjar who had accompanied them was already telling the others about the festival when they returned. He showed them the flowers he had received, how the Frost Giant children did not fear him, how the square was filled with beautiful colors and how good the food had been. Within the hour, news of the festivities had spread and interest was growing. Even the two Einherjar who Thor had reprimanded earlier seemed interested in going to see the city and the lights later that evening.

Thor went out with the Einherjar later on to hunt down some food for their dinner, and Loki stayed behind to read more of the books they’d bought. When the hunters returned, the entire camp was making arrangements to journey over to the city and see the aurora.

The evening meal was light and quick. The Asgardians were interested in trying the Jotun food, although several of them did pack their own flasks of mead. Night was falling as the guards discussed who would stay to guard the camp, and then the Asgardians began to leave intermittently in small groups.

After most of the party had left, Thor got to his feet and tapped lightly at Loki’s arm.

“Are you coming to the city with us, my lords?” a passing Einherjar asked.

Thor smiled and shook his head. “No; we have already experienced the city earlier today. There is an open part of the cavern further back. Loki and I will watch the aurora from there.”

Loki glanced at him and resisted the urge to punch him. Why would Thor *tell* them where they were going to be?

Instead, the Einherjar dipped his head in a nod. “Very well. The camp will be well-guarded. We

will not be gone long.”

Thor and Loki watched him go, and when the cavern was empty of all but about four Einherjar who sat at the entrance to the cave, Thor gestured for Loki to follow him.

Chapter 12

Loki's heart was in his throat the entire journey back to the spring. They knew the way well enough in the dark by now, but Thor kept a tight hold on his hand as they traversed the cave tunnels.

Loki knew what would happen tonight. Thor had not even had to say it. Loki had not had to ask for it. They both knew. There would never be a better chance, or a more perfect place, or a safer time. At least, not for a long, long while.

They turned into the by-now familiar corridor and a distant shine of light began to illuminate their way. When they emerged into the spring cavern, the moonlight was streaming through the open ceiling, the steam was wafting lazily up into the sky, and...a pile of furs and pillows was set up to the side.

Loki raised an eyebrow, smirking. "What's all this?" he asked.

"Well..." Thor mumbled, shrugging slightly. "I want you to be comfortable. It is rather rocky here."

"When did you do this?"

"When you weren't paying attention."

Loki smiled and gave his brother a kiss. "You are entirely too sweet to me."

"I can't help it. I want to give you everything."

To hide his flushed face, Loki grabbed Thor around the shoulders and pressed into him for a hug. He couldn't stand it when Thor said things like that. Yes, he knew that his brother meant well, but Loki was not used to such raw declarations of love. It felt wrong somehow. Like a lie. Like he didn't deserve it. But it was so hard to disbelieve anything that Thor said. Thor hugged him back, rubbing his hands up and down Loki's back and shoulders.

Eventually, Thor's hands wriggled their way in between their chests, unclasping the fur cloak from around Loki's neck. Loki allowed it, hearing the *fwump* of the furs hitting the ground behind him.

"I will give you everything," Thor said, softly into the top of Loki's skull.

Loki shuddered inwardly. He was ready. He knew it. He wanted nothing more than this.

The hug broke somewhat slowly, and Thor was smiling. "Well, shall we get warmed up?" He gestured to the spring.

Loki nodded and they moved over to the fur bed Thor had prepared. As Thor pulled off his boots and his shirt, Loki's eyes were all over him. Thor noticed, of course, and seemed to enjoy the attention. He grinned at Loki as he removed his belt and shuffled out of his pants, being sure to turn around and give Loki a full view of his bare buttocks.

"Did you know that you have dimples, Brother?" Loki asked, pulling off his own shirt.

"What do you mean?"

"Dimples. On your asscheeks."

Thor laughed. "Do I?" He looked over his shoulder in an attempt to see. "How about that?"

Loki smirked and wriggled his way out of his own pants as Thor slipped into the water. Thor swam lazily through the spring, dipping his head beneath water and reemerging, his golden hair sticking to the back of his neck. Thor had not removed the Mjolnir necklace even once since receiving it. Loki wished he could do the same with his hair ornament.

When Loki was completely disrobed, Thor looked at him hungrily from the spring. Loki only rolled his eyes and quickly submerged himself in the warm waters. Almost immediately Thor was there beside him, wrapping his arms around Loki's waist and breathing in his scent.

"Thank you, Loki," Thor said, his tone almost sleepy.

"What for?"

"For these past months. For letting me love you. For loving me back." Thor spoke the last sentence cautiously. In all this time, he had declared his love for Loki over and over, but Loki had never, not *once*, said the words to him. "...You do love me, don't you, Loki?"

"Of course I do." The words came easily. Loki did not have to think about them. Thor was the *only* thing, the only person that Loki loved.

"Would you tell me so?" Thor pressed a kiss to Loki's temple. "Please? Just once."

It clicked in Loki's brain then, what it was Thor wanted from him. "...I," he began, though the words felt odd, "...love you too."

Thor kissed him again, and Loki could feel the smile on his lips. Thor pulled away after lingering a moment, and then his eyes looked Loki up and down.

"Your color is coming in," he said softly.

Loki glanced down at his arms and saw the blue creeping up his skin. He swallowed tightly and looked back up at Thor. "Are you sure...that you're all right with this? With me, this way?"

"Yes." Another kiss. "Yes, I am sure. You are so beautiful."

Loki turned towards him and pressed his lips into Thor's, exactly where he belonged. He opened his mouth, letting Thor in, and the feel of his tongue was so familiar now. Thor's tongue always came into his mouth the same way, always with the same strength and deftness. Loki reached his arms up and hung them loosely over Thor's shoulders, grabbing ahold of his own wrist.

Thor's hands were on Loki's hips, his strong fingers pressing into Loki's cool skin, and with no effort at all, Thor lifted Loki up. Loki wrapped his legs around Thor's torso as Thor held him easily in place; Loki could feel Thor's cock pressing up against his own, and his breath hitched. Thor was holding Loki's ass in both hands, his fingers periodically and gently kneading into it, and Loki's heart raced. Thor normally did not touch him so brazenly, but it did nothing but excite Loki. He trusted Thor to stop if Loki truly needed him to stop. For now, Loki truly needed for him to continue.

The feeling and extra heat of Thor's wide, strong hands on his ass was exciting Loki with each passing second. He began to let out small, low whines into Thor's mouth, instinctively pushing his hips closer into Thor's hips. Already they were both growing hard. Loki wondered if Thor planned to take him here, right in this water. A part of him hoped not, as it would seem wrong to spill their seed into a sacred Jotun spring.

Thor moved away from Loki's lips and onto his neck, biting hard and sucking long, slow laps at the wound. He knew all the right spots now. He knew exactly how much Loki could stand of his teeth, knew the spot that make him inhale deeply and whimper out a tiny breath. Thor ran his tongue over the ridges that ran in a semi-circle between Loki's shoulders. The ridges were rough, not abrasive, but undoubtedly still skin. Thor loved it. He ran his thumbs over the ridges adorning Loki's ass, drinking up the shudder that ran through his little brother's body.

He could not imagine how he had ever found Loki anything but divinely desirable in this body.

Though it had caused Loki much pain, and much confusion, and nearly torn apart their brotherhood, Thor was glad that Loki discovered his heritage. Even today Thor did not understand how their father could have not planned on telling them. The knowledge would not have done Loki any better once they were older. It might have even affected him much worse.

Thor would repair the damage done to both their realms by the war. He would do it for Loki. One day, Loki would be able to walk the streets of Asgard in full Jotun form and not worry about a single thing.

Loki's legs were tightening around Thor's body. Thor could feel his brother's hardness straining against his stomach. He felt a surge of affection and protectiveness for Loki at just that moment. Even if Loki chose not to say the words with his mouth, he certainly spoke his love for Thor in every motion of his body, and it was enough. It was more than enough. Thor was in a trance hearing Loki's small noises, feeling the tiny squeezes of Loki's legs against his torso.

Thor slowly waded through the water, carrying Loki with him, and set his brother on the edge of the spring. Before Loki could ask what he was doing, Thor put his hands on Loki's knees and pushed them apart. Any words that Loki had been about to say died in his throat; his eyes went wide and his face flushed heavily at the realization of what Thor was about to do.

Thor kept his hands on Loki's thighs, softly rubbing his thumbs in the soft inner flesh, massaging Loki's legs until he felt the tension slowly leaving his brother's body. He gazed at the genitals between Loki's legs, having never truly seen them before.

Loki had a cock; that much was obvious. Behind it, where his balls would otherwise be, were instead two folds of flesh. Thor had never laid with or seen a naked woman before, but he knew enough to realize what he was looking at. It did not repulse him, as Loki had so often feared. Instead, he felt a thrill. Loki had never shown this part of him to anybody before. The fact that he was sharing it with Thor now, allowing him to see it, touch it, do whatever he liked with it...Thor took in a deep breath and swallowed.

He glanced up, meeting Loki's eyes. His brother was gazing down at him, his face unreadable but tinged a distinct shade of red.

Thor leaned in and softly kissed the inside of Loki's thigh. A shudder went up Loki's body; Thor waited for Loki to relax again, and then placed another kiss. He did it over and over, Loki's tension dissipating each time, Thor's lips moving farther inward as he went. By the time he was close enough to tickle the underside of Loki's cock with his beard, Loki was stifling his whimpers into his hand.

Thor paused again, glancing up to get a glimpse of Loki's face. His brother's eyes were shut tight, his face completely red, one shaking arm extended behind him to hold himself upright.

Thor moved in closer, letting his coarse whiskers scrape against the sensitive skin, and pressed a kiss where the lips met. Loki took in a sharp breath but said nothing. Thor pushed his tongue past

the folds of skin and licked up, once, slowly, heavily, and Loki cried out.

“A—*AH!*” Loki shrieked, his one arm giving out as he clumsily lowered himself onto his elbows.

Thor rather liked that noise, so he licked again, and this time Loki’s whimper was delicious.

Loki was so warm and wet and luscious, Thor could not get enough of it. He ran his tongue up and down in slow strokes, sometimes tracing the insides of the folds with the tip of his tongue, and each time Loki’s breaths came faster and deeper, positively sobbing for Thor to continue.

Thor’s tongue hit one very small spot that caused Loki to scream and draw his knees up so quickly they smashed Thor on the side of his head, splashing water all over Thor’s face.

“*OW*—Loki, be careful!” Thor exclaimed, sharply pulling away.

“Oh...oh Thor I’m so sorry!” Loki shouted, leaning forward and reaching out to touch his head.

“I’m sorry, did I hurt you?”

“No, no, all is well, Brother.” To reassure him, Thor pulled Loki down for a kiss. “Just do try not to crush me.”

Loki smiled, a bit shyly, and leaned back on his elbows. “Um...” he said quietly, “...do what you just did. Again. Please.”

“This is good for you?”

“*Yes*. Yes, Thor, it is...*quite* good for me.”

Thor grinned and kissed the inside of Loki’s thighs again. He gently spread Loki’s knees a bit wider and then leaned in to continue. He had never done anything like this before, but he was already growing used to it. Loki was nothing if not forthcoming with his declarations of pleasure. Thor pressed his thick tongue deeper past the folds, searching for the spot that drove Loki wild. Another shriek from Loki told him that he had found it; he lapped lightly with the tip of his tongue, feeling Loki’s legs shake on either side of his head.

Without thinking, Thor put his hands underneath Loki’s knees and lifted his brother’s legs up onto his shoulders. Loki leaned back further, his ankles crossed behind Thor’s head, his thighs trembling with restraint. It was such an odd taste, but Thor was quickly learning to love it. Loki was becoming wetter and wetter as Thor continued, his tongue sliding easily over the sensitive flesh, until Loki was practically crying.

Loki sat up, his body curled over Thor’s head, tightly grasping his hair with cold fingers. “Thor please Thor *please*,” he repeated over and over, breathless and entranced. The noises he was making were beyond delightful; Thor wished they had tried this before, if only he had known Loki could make such sounds. His heart was racing and his cock was straining underneath the water.

Finally, Loki cried out, his whole body jerking inwards towards Thor’s head. Thor continued to lick through Loki’s whimpers and waves, trying to slow the motion of his tongue to fit the rhythm of Loki’s violent exhales. Eventually, Loki’s tight grip on his hair loosened, and Thor slowed down, waiting for Loki’s legs to relax before he finally pulled away. He placed another kiss on the outer lips, and then pulled away to look Loki in the face.

“You cannot convince me...” Loki said breathlessly, “that you have never done that before.”

“I haven’t! Though I am flattered you say so.”

Loki leaned down and gave Thor a kiss, lingering a while to take in the taste of himself on his brother's lips. "Well, it certainly will not be your last time."

"It won't, will it?"

"I want you to do that every night from now on."

"*Every night?*" Thor feigned contemplation. "I think my jaw would cramp."

"You will in all likelihood learn to accept it."

Thor grinned. He reached up, grabbed Loki around the waist, and pulled him back into the water. For a long while they did nothing but embrace and kiss without a word. Thor could feel Loki's heart racing against his bare chest and a slight warmth permeating his cool Jotun skin.

Eventually, Loki patted Thor on the shoulder and said, "Brother, look. The lights have come out."

Thor turned around and gazed up through the cavern's hollow ceiling. Indeed, the aurora lights of Jotunheim were beginning to emerge, the deep, sharp colors a vivid contrast to the empty blackness of sky.

Auroras appeared in Asgard as well, during certain times of the year. From the highest towers of the palace, Thor and Loki had watched the lights with Frigga until they fell asleep. Thor remembered those nights only slightly. The lights came out so late at night that as they grew older, it was less easy to justify staying awake for so long. Eventually, they had stopped watching them altogether.

But never in his memories could he recall that the lights ever looked half as beautiful as the ones they saw now, here in Jotunheim. The lights flickered and danced over the sky, colors rapidly changing from green to blue and purple and back again, vivid curtains backlit by the brightest and clearest stars Thor had ever seen. He wondered what the rest of the Asgardians were doing in the Jotun city now. Part of him wished he could see the celebrations, but nothing would be nearly as joyous as watching this sight with his brother.

Thor looked over to Loki. The otherworldly mixture of colors in the sky and the graceful folds of light dancing high above them could never come close to the beauty that was Loki's face just at that moment.

Thor did not know that he had ever, *ever* seen Loki with such a smile on his face. His eyes were wide and his smile was enormous; the last time Thor recalled that Loki had looked this full of glee was when they were small children, and Thor had made Loki laugh for the first time. Loki's eyes kept darting back and forth across the sky, trying to look at everything at once, and his smile did nothing but grow bigger and bigger.

Loki's smile—Loki's real, *true*, happy smile—was so rare. To see such a smile on his Jotun face was something Thor was certain he would never have a chance to witness. The sight of this would never leave his memory. If nothing else came of everything they had done together these past months, it would all still be worth it for this moment.

Thor felt a swell of peacefulness, as if all had finally been healed. They'd done it, him and Loki both. Deep in his heart Thor knew that it was not that easy, that there were still enough wounds to reconcile, but it was nice to pretend, if just for a little while.

Thor did not know how long the lights lasted. Over time, they began to fade, their colors less vibrant and the curtains flickering from view. Loki looked back over at Thor, his face radiant with

joy.

“That was so beautiful,” Loki said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Jotunheim is more beautiful than I ever knew,” Thor replied, reaching over to push some of Loki’s hair behind his ear. “I swear to you I will not let that be forgotten again.”

Thor wrapped his arms around Loki’s torso and Loki leaned in to kiss him. Thor easily lifted Loki back out of the water and set him on the edge of the spring, then climbed out after him. Loki got to his feet and eagerly leapt into Thor’s arms again, pressing kisses to Thor’s rough stubble and deep into the soft flesh of his neck.

Thor brought Loki over to the fur blankets he’d set up earlier and laid him down gently. He’d wanted this for so long, he’d dreamt of it at night, he’d rehearsed over and over how he would do it when the day finally came. He’d always known he’d be nervous; how could he not be? What if he couldn’t pleasure Loki the way he wanted? What if he was terrible at this? What if he did something wrong and Loki would no longer allow Thor to touch him?

Thor tried to find something to say, some words that would make all of this special, but every thought he’d pored over was gone now. He sat there, kneeling over his brother’s exposed body, feeling cold from the loss of the water’s heat, and feeling more like a child than he ever had before.

Loki reached out, hooked his fingers around the back of Thor’s neck, and brought him down into a kiss. It was quick, nervous, and more reminiscent of their earlier attempts than anything that was commonplace now. When they broke away, Loki softly said, “Brother, I trust you.”

Thor nodded, repositioning himself so that he was straddling Loki from above. Thor was already hard, as was Loki, and though he knew the mechanics of how this was supposed to work....

“Ah...” he murmured quietly, “I’ll...I’ll go slow, all right?”

Loki nodded.

“If you want me to...stop...or slow down...” Thor stammered, “just...just say so. I promise I’ll stop if you say stop. Or if you want me to—”

“Thor,” Loki said flatly. “This apprehension does not suit you.”

Thor took in a deep breath and exhaled quickly. “Forgive me. Let me just....” He leaned down closer over Loki’s body and kissed him, figuring that if he was focusing on doing something familiar, it would be easier to continue.

Beneath him, Loki spread his legs and wrapped them around Thor’s torso. Despite the residual heat of the hot spring’s water clinging to Loki’s skin, there was still an air of coolness hanging about him. Combined with the heat radiating from Thor’s body, their bed was becoming a comfortably mild temperature.

Loki’s hips bucked upward; Thor’s hardness was hitting Loki’s inner thighs, and the instinct to bury himself inside Loki’s warm place was taking over. Thor broke away for a moment and took in another breath, shifting his hips in an attempt to find the entrance without looking.

“Just a moment—” he murmured, lifting himself up a bit and gazing down at their hips. A flood of embarrassment and frustration rushed into him; this was *not* how he had envisioned this going.

“Just relax,” Loki said. He lifted his hips a little more and reached down between their bodies. He

took hold of Thor's cock and guided it beneath his own, into the wet lips Thor had licked earlier.

"All right," Thor exhaled, his ears growing redder by the instant. "Sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for." Loki kissed his cheek.

Thor experimentally pushed into Loki further, finding that he glided in smoothly and without any real resistance. He watched Loki's face intently, searching for any hint of pain.

Suddenly, Loki burst out laughing. Thor's heart sank and he grew frantic.

"*What!*" Thor exclaimed. "Are you all right? What's the matter?!"

"Nothing's the matter!" Loki said in between giggles. "You just—you just look so *serious!*"

"I'm just trying to concentrate!"

"You are doing *fine!*" Loki laughed again. "Don't think about it too hard, Brother. That has never been your way."

Thor took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "All right," he said softly, more to himself than to Loki. "I want this to be perfect."

"It already is, Thor."

A new calmness filled Thor's chest and he breathed out again. He leaned down and began to nip at Loki's neck, the spot he liked the best, the spots he *knew* and did not have to think about. He pushed into Loki a little farther, sliding in as slowly as he could bear. Loki's body tensed a few times beneath him, and he made a few noises of momentary discomfort, but he encouraged Thor to go on, and Thor was all too glad to comply.

Soon, there was nowhere left to go. Thor continued to bite Loki's soft skin, rubbing the tip of his tongue over the cold ridges on Loki's neck.

"Thor, why did you stop?" Loki asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I—are you in?"

"Of course, can't you feel it?"

"*Yes,*" Loki replied indignantly. "I just...I was expecting it to..."

"What, be bigger?" Thor asked, feeling a twinge of shame.

"*No.* I expected it to hurt more."

"It is not supposed to hurt."

There was a moment of silence. "Hmm," Loki said eventually. "Well then...carry on."

Now it was Thor's turn to laugh. He sat up and stared down at Loki. "'Carry on'?" he repeated. "And you are insufferable about *my* romantic gestures."

Loki huffed. He reached up and pulled Thor's head down, bringing Thor's ear just a bare inch

from Loki's lips. "I want you to stop toying around and *fuck me*," he whispered. "Fuck me until you conjure a storm and the thunder brings down the mountains of Jotunheim. Fuck me like you've wanted to since the day you stopped yourself from kissing me."

Thor nodded wordlessly. Loki released his hold on him and laid back, looking up at Thor with ruby red eyes. Thor went back in to Loki's neck, biting the skin harder than ever before, and was rewarded with a hiss of inhalation and Loki's cold arms around his shoulders.

Thor began to rock his hips into Loki, rhythmically, slowly, shifting this way and that to test which way Loki liked it. One thing he knew: he could *not* finish before Loki. That much he had promised himself, and that much he could manage.

Soon, Loki was beginning to make the noises that Thor knew well. It started with barely a whimper and the slight tensing of his muscles. Thor tried to keep up the rhythm, momentarily slowing the speed of his strokes, and found that Loki seemed to like that better.

Without warning, Loki gasped sharply and breathed out, "Yes there right there keep doing that...."

It was getting more and more difficult to stave off Thor's growing desire to spend himself deep into his brother, but he had to wait. He had to take care of Loki first. He pushed forward again, deep and slow, pulling out just a little, and then back in again.

Loki was so warm and *hot* and wet around him. It was like Thor was made to be in him. He wished he could bury himself deep inside his brother and never come out again. Loki's small, shaking legs were spread wide for him, his arms drawing him close, holding him tightly, and Thor felt a dizzying rush of affection and sped up. He kissed Loki's neck, biting harder, sucking longer, running his hands through Loki's wet black strands of hair. Loki was whining directly into Thor's ears, and he craved it, longed for more of those sounds, wanted to pull every last whimper and keen from his brother's lips and know that all of them were just for Thor.

As Thor fucked in with a particularly rough, deliberate stroke, Loki gasped, his breath hitching. Thor moved from Loki's neck to his lips, holding both side of Loki's face in between his hands, *needing* and *hungering* for Loki's noises. Thor pushed his tongue into Loki's open mouth, playfully sliding it over Loki's own and nipping gently at his puffed lips.

He took a moment to watch, *truly* watch Loki's face. His little brother's eyes were half-lidded, squeezing them shut each time Thor thrust up and in. Loki's mouth hung open slightly, exhaling whimpers and hard puffs of air. His cobalt blue skin was flushed, and Thor could see where Loki's blush went across the bridge of his nose as it always did. The blush was more purple now than red, but it was there just the same.

"You are so beautiful," Thor repeated, though he was almost certain Loki could not hear him. Thor kissed him again, drinking up the ecstatic sobs, rubbing his thumbs over the ridges on Loki's face. "So lovely...I love you, Loki, I love you...."

Loki's exhalations were increasing, and his legs squeezed Thor's taut body as tightly as he could. Thor had not noticed before, but at some point Loki's hands had made their way around Thor's biceps, and they were squeezing, Loki's fingers pushing deep bruises into Thor's skin. Thor knew he would cherish them.

Thor kissed Loki around his chin, his jaw, his temple, heaping waves upon waves of adoration on Loki's face. The rhythm of their hips had become automatic now; there was nothing else Thor's body knew how to do than this.

“Aah—*aah*—*AAH*—” Loki breathed haltingly, growing louder each time, until finally, finally, his legs seized Thor in between them and squeezed, and Loki cried out with reckless wantonness, a scream and sob of pleasure, of intimacy, of completion.

Thor slowed his pace only a little, waiting for Loki to finish completely, until he finally chased his own orgasm and gasped out in ecstasy, spilling his seed deep into Loki. The waning pulses of Loki’s inner muscles milked out the final waves of Thor’s finish until the sensation was nothing but a ghost.

They both laid there, catching their breath, looking each other in the eyes with no words to say and none that were needed. Thor did not want to pull out, not just yet. He felt so warm and complete and safe inside his brother. He did not want an instant of time to pass beyond this moment.

Eventually, time had to continue forward. Thor brushed some of Loki’s hair away from his face, running his fingertips along the shell of his ear. “Did I hurt you?” he asked, the question heavy on his heart.

Loki smiled and shook his head, reaching up to touch the back of Thor’s hand. “No,” he replied.

Thor kissed Loki’s forehead, lingering there a good long while. When he pulled away, he reluctantly but carefully slid himself out of Loki and dropped down to lay beside him. Loki gave an exaggerated pout.

“What, are we finished already?” he asked.

“Of course not,” Thor replied. “Give just me a minute to rest.”

Loki rolled back his eyes and huffed. “And here I was expecting to be ravished by the *mighty* warrior Thor, and yet he needs a nap after one go.”

Thor laughed and reached his arm over Loki’s chest, pulling him up into a fierce kiss. “Did I ravish you, dear brother?”

“If I said yes I would never hear the end of it.”

“Well, even if the answer is no, we have all the time in the world to improve upon it.”

Loki rolled his eyes again and wriggled out of Thor’s grasp. He climbed over Thor’s chest, straddling him, and leaned down to kiss Thor’s collarbone. Loki’s exposed skin on Thor’s own was an oddly intoxicating mixture of coolness and warmth; some indeterminate bodily fluids were leaking out of Loki’s genitals, but Thor hardly cared.

Loki’s lips moved from Thor’s collarbone to the dip below his neck, and down between his pectoral muscles. Loki kissed his body slowly, with affection, lavishing full attention on each expanse of flesh before moving on. He could not recall how often he had thought of doing this, or how long he had wanted to. Loki would never admit it out loud to anybody but Thor, but his brother’s body was the most beautiful thing he knew existed in all the Nine Realms. Thor was so *perfect* it was maddening. Loki pressed kisses to Thor’s biceps, down to his forearm, and then the palm of his hand and each of his fingers.

All the while, Thor was silent, rapt, watching Loki’s every move. In the moments when Loki met Thor’s eyes and saw the unnamable adoration in them, he quickly turned away, still unable to deal with it. Loki did not deserve this, but *Thor* did. He had to show him. Loki had to show Thor that everything everybody said about him was right, whether Loki outwardly admitted it or not. Thor *was* perfect, the perfect child, the perfect prince, but most of all, he belonged to Loki in the same

way Loki belonged to him.

Loki paused a moment. A small smile tugged the corners of his lips upward. *I suppose it truly was that simple all along...and I just never realized it.*

Loki was not truly of Asgard, nor truly of Jotunheim. The only place he'd ever belonged, the only *person* he'd ever belonged with was Thor.

"What are you smiling about?" Thor asked, his voice sounding dreamy.

"Nothing," Loki lied. He kissed the back of Thor's hand. "I am just happy."

Loki went back down to Thor's chest, his lips lingering on Thor's pectorals, his left hand wandering up to grab at Thor's bicep and squeeze gently at the muscle. Thor's body was so hard and solid beneath him, it was thrilling in ways he couldn't name. Loki shimmied down further, planting kisses the whole way, nuzzling into Thor's abs, licking and nipping at the skin. Thor's breath was rhythmic and strong, his stomach rising and falling gently. Loki's hands moved down to just above Thor's hips, and Loki's breath hitched, his brother was just *so solid* as if his body was forged from the same metal as Mjolnir. Loki whined a bit, his voice greedy, and kissed and bit and loved Thor's body harder.

As he continued his way down, Loki felt Thor's hardness between his legs. He shifted, positioning himself on top of Thor's thighs and pretended not to notice the straining cock that was starting to make Thor antsy. Loki still had half of Thor's body left to go that needed attention. His brother could wait. A good king was patient, was he not?

"Loki," Thor groaned softly, grabbing a fistful of fur blanket in one hand.

"Patience, Brother," Loki said, flashing him a devious grin as he descended onto Thor's thick, perfect legs. Thor's chest was still smooth as a boy's, but his thighs, not so. Yet the inner flesh, the soft, sensitive area just too far away from his cock, *that* was oh so supple, untouched and vulnerable. Loki pressed his lips there, holding down Thor's leg as he tried to jerk it upward with a gasp. He lingered, letting his tongue slip out every so often to teasingly swipe at the skin. Every time Thor twitched, Loki would nip down with his teeth, just hard enough to evoke a yelp.

Loki reached up to Thor's hip again, massaging gently before digging his fingers underneath and kneading at Thor's magnificent ass. Thor lifted his hips just enough to allow Loki easier access, and Loki squeezed as hard as he could, willing the bruises to appear and mark his brother for days to come. Thor moaned and bucked his hips again, his cock beginning to leak pre-cum.

Loki licked experimentally up the inside of Thor's thigh, keeping away from where Thor needed it most. He squeezed Thor's ass again as he bit down on his brother's hips, dragging his teeth over the rough pelvic bone.

Suddenly, he felt Thor sit up and grab him around the waist. Loki looked up, putting on his best innocent expression.

"You are driving me mad," Thor breathed, his face flushed.

"Am I?" Loki asked. "Is that a compliment?"

Thor grinned and kissed Loki fiercely, passionately and with dizzying *control*. As he broke away Loki inhaled sharply, trying to catch his breath.

"I...I'm sorry," Thor said, wincing, his voice small. "Was I too rough?"

“Do it again,” was all Loki could say, reaching up and entwining his fingers in Thor’s hair, yanking his brother forward back onto his lips.

“I don’t—” Thor said haltingly, in between kisses “—want to hurt you, little brother...but gods, *gods* I love you—I never want to stop touching you....”

“Then don’t stop,” Loki replied, pushing their hips closer together. “Which way will you have me?”

“Until you scream.”

“Let’s see if you can manage that.”

Thor pushed his body deeper into Loki, placed a hand on his little brother’s back and laid him back onto the furs. Loki spread his legs wide and Thor settled in between them, finding Loki’s entrance a bit more easily this time. Loki wrapped his legs around Thor’s back, his knees squeezing Thor’s torso tight enough to push some of the breath out of him.

Thor rocked into Loki easily; Loki was still wet and pliant and eager. A shudder went through Thor’s body as he seated himself fully inside. Loki was warm, so warm around him, they fit together so perfectly. Thor dropped himself to lay directly atop Loki, just the way his brother liked, and Loki exhaled a surprised gasp into his mouth. Thor moved to Loki’s neck, grinning at the blossoming bruises he could already see there. With a swell of pride, he knew these would not be easily hidden.

He took hold of Loki’s arms, pulling his hands away from Thor’s hair, and entwined their fingers together. Thor pressed Loki’s hands gently to the ground and continued biting everywhere on Loki’s neck that he could reach. All the while, he was thrusting greedily in, reminding himself not to be so far gone that he would not hear Loki should he wish to stop.

Loki, it seemed, had no intention of telling Thor to stop. His hips were bucking up into Thor’s thrusts, matching his rhythm as best he could, but already his legs were giving out and he dropped them to the floor.

An idea came to Thor, and before he could stop himself, he released one of Loki’s hands, reached down and gently grasped Loki’s erect cock.

Loki gasped sharply. “What are you doing?!” he demanded breathlessly.

Thor released him immediately. “I’m sorry...should I not?”

“I...I don’t know.”

Thor kissed his forehead. “Shall we try for just a little while, and see if you like it?”

Loki considered it a moment, the blush in his face growing deeper and rendering him absolutely gorgeous. “I...I suppose it couldn’t hurt....”

Thor gently curled his fingers around Loki’s cock again, his palm radiating with body heat. Cautiously, slowly so as not to overstimulate him, Thor began to pump the loose skin up and down.

Loki whimpered and shut his eyes tight.

“Is it too much?” Thor asked.

Loki said nothing, only shook his head. Warily, watching Loki's face all the while, Thor continued. Once it seemed that Loki had calmed, once his muscles had relaxed and he was no longer shaking with tension, Thor began to rock his hips again. He matched the rhythm of his hand as best he could, fucking with long, deep, deliberate strokes into Loki.

"Aah!" Loki yelped, unexpectedly, clapping his free hand over his mouth and looking straight into Thor's eyes.

"I have you, Brother," Thor said gently, speeding up just ever so slightly. "You are safe."

Unbidden, Loki felt a tear threaten to escape his half-lidded eyes. He struggled to hold it back, knowing that if Thor saw he would stop everything and heavens knew they would never be able to get this moment back. How was Thor...*doing* all of this? How did he know Loki's body so well? When had he learned? How could he tell, with just a look, just a sound, a twitch of Loki's body, how did Thor know *exactly* what to do?

How was he so perfect, so faultless, and so divine? Why would he put everything at risk to be here with him, with *Loki*, this way? Loki was not special enough for Thor to put his birthright on the line for him. He couldn't be. How could he deserve it?

Loki sobbed out a whimper as the sensations in both of his genitals heightened. He muffled himself further, determined not to scream, determined not to cry like a virginal maiden who had just experienced her first orgasm. He had never been so open, so exposed, so defenseless...not even in his darkest fantasies had he imagined showing Thor this much. He was about to be broken down into nothing, into his basest and most shameful essence.

He wasn't ready. He couldn't do this, couldn't show him how weak and how wretched he was and how desperately, *desperately* he needed Thor.

And yet there Thor was, staring at him with the most loving adoration in his eyes, doing things to him with his hands and his body and his heart that Loki had never imagined. Things that Loki could never, *would* never do for himself. Things he didn't deserve. Especially not from Thor.

"I have you," Thor whispered again, softly and reassuringly.

His pleasure was reaching a peak and Loki could not stand it anymore. He shut his eyes and screamed into his hand, all his agony, all his ecstasy, hating the way Thor loved him and knowing he would die without it. Terrified beyond words that this might be taken from him. Euphoric that the universe had seen fit to grant him his only wish. He did not know what else to do, and so he screamed.

One more thrust and the scream turned to a sob. He was crying and he was so happy, so scared. And then Thor was there, kissing his forehead, kissing the exposed areas of his cheeks, kissing the back of his hand that kept the truth from spilling out.

"Loki," Thor said, his voice hovering just an inch from his ear. "What's wrong?"

"Do you really love me?" The question came out so quickly, tumbling past the barrier of his fingers, and Loki wanted it back the moment it escaped him. It sounded so childish and so weak, and worst of all so *needy*. Perhaps this would finally be the last straw that pushed Thor away for good.

Instead, Thor just smiled. "Yes," he said, nodding. He leaned in close, and Loki reluctantly moved his hand away from his mouth. As he did, Thor kissed him, directly on his cold, blue lips. "I have

always loved you, and I will love you for all the rest of my days.”

Loki swallowed tightly. He believed him. He did not know why, but he believed him.

All the energy and anxiety flooded out of Loki at once, and he laid there limp and weakened, staring up at Thor’s bright face. Thor had that look again, the expression of unconditional love and acceptance, and Loki forced himself not to look away. It still felt odd, like it was undeserved, but just a little, just a little Loki could accept that it was for him. Freely given.

Thor thrust again, gently at first, and then with more strength, his hand moving in tandem with his hips. Loki breathed in deep again, giving his entire body over to Thor’s control, squeezing Thor’s hand and spreading his legs wider.

Thor was growing steadily more dominant with his motions, and Loki loved every second of it. A certain storm grew in Thor’s eyes when he was single-mindedly chasing something like this, his sheer strength and power seeping out of his skin into the air around him. Loki whined, craving that power inside him, craving Thor’s strength in every crevice of his body.

Thor’s hand tightened around Loki’s cock and Loki knew he was close. Loki bucked his hips upward, his muscles sore and exhausted. He could see Thor’s own muscles tightening all over his body and the sweat appearing on his brow. The heightening of pleasure was almost blinding in its intensity, piercing deep inside him and tearing sounds from his mouth that Loki never thought himself capable of making. He tried to say his brother’s name, tried to plead him for more, more, harder, harder, but all that came out was a shameless keening.

And then, with an almost painful shot of ecstasy into every last one of his nerves, Loki’s finish crashed into him and he screamed, gasped for air like he was drowning. Warmth permeated his insides and his stomach as he spilled all over himself, all over Thor’s hand, and he humped his hips further into Thor’s fist, pleading and *begging* for him to draw it out as long as he could. Shortly after, another orgasm hit him, his inner walls clenching down on Thor’s cock buried deep inside him. It was too much. It was all *too* much, and Loki let his body go limp, inhaling as much air as his lungs could hold, feeling the blood pulse heavily in his veins.

Loki could have believed that he passed out for the barest instant, because his next sensation was that of Thor’s lips on his forehead. Thor’s strong hips were grinding deeper into him, spilling his seed back into his brother, his pelvis humping greedily into him in tiny strokes to chase down the last pulses of his climax. Thor’s lips were everywhere, kissing every spot he could reach, his sweat running down onto Loki’s face.

“Never doubt that I love you,” Thor breathed heavily, gasping for air. He kissed Loki again, the taste of sweat mingling with his natural musk. “Never, *never* doubt that I love you, Loki.”

I’ll try. For you, I will try. Loki only nodded wordlessly and Thor smiled, resting his forehead against Loki’s and laying there motionless for a while.

Loki was not sure of how much time actually passed. He just laid there, focusing on the warmth of Thor’s hand, the thickness of Thor inside him, and the soft breath that Thor exhaled across his face.

Loki did not want to leave this cave, not ever. He didn’t want to go back to the tent, or continue the talks with Jotunheim. He didn’t want to go back home to Asgard. He just wanted to be here, with nobody else but Thor, where neither of them needed anything but one another. He reached up and embraced Thor’s shoulders with both arms, squeezing him tightly to his chest. He whined audibly as Thor released his hold on his cock and slipped out of him all at once.

Thor curled up beside him, and they did not speak, they only held each other, not needing to say a word.

Could anything for them really ever progress past this point? Loki was no fool. He knew that Thor could not marry him. He knew that he would never get to stay here, where nobody could find them. What was left for them but disappointment? At this, their greatest moment, what else could follow but pain?

“Thor,” Loki said softly, taking hold of Thor’s hand and running his thumb over the soft joints.

“Yes?”

“May I add another stipulation to our bargain?”

“Of course. What would you ask of me?”

“...During my yearly heat, will you bring me back here?” He looked up to meet Thor’s eyes. “Can we come back to this place, just you and me?”

Thor smiled, his eyes bright and shining. “Yes. Yes, we will come back here.” He kissed Loki’s cheek. Loki smiled back but it did not reach his eyes.

“Loki, what’s wrong?” Thor asked, deep concern flashing over his face. “I feel as though I’ve done something to upset you.”

“No...no, it’s not you, Brother. I’m...” Loki sighed. “I’ve enjoyed this time with you very much. So much that I wonder what can be left for us now. How do we go back home and continue on this way?”

Thor paused, looking at their entwined hands. “Perhaps we will not go home,” he mumbled softly.

“We would be found. It does not matter where we go.”

Thor hugged Loki tighter to his chest, holding him there for a long while before letting go with a deep sigh. “I know.”

“So what do we do?”

Another heavy pause. Thor exhaled through his nose and sat up, gently pulling Loki up with him. “We get cleaned up,” he said softly. “And then we rest.”

Loki laughed humorlessly but the thought of dipping back into the hot spring sounded amazing just now. They padded over to the water’s edge again and slipped back beneath it. Loki let out a contented sigh as the warmth of the water spread throughout his body, and he dipped his head beneath the water, washing away the sweat and the fluids that had accumulated on his skin. The sky above them was clear now and devoid of lights. The stars were out, so much brighter and more numerous than Loki had ever seen in Asgard.

After they were both sufficiently washed, Thor helped Loki out of the spring and patted them both dry with the furs. Thor snuck a few squeezes at Loki’s ass, which earned him a swift punch on the shoulder. He laughed, but even Loki could see that his heart was not truly in it.

When they were dry, they picked up their pieces of clothing and pulled them back on. Loki could not help but fear that this was the last time—for a long while, if not ever—that he would see his brother’s body. Once dressed, Thor turned over the fur that they had been lying on, and the two of

them laid back down. Perhaps they should have been heading back to the camp, but “should” had long ago lost meaning.

About an hour passed that they laid there, not saying a word. Thor felt the instant that Loki drifted off to sleep. His little brother had been resting his head on Thor’s shoulder, his gentle weight turning heavier as slumber claimed him. Thor spent a few minutes idly brushing at Loki’s soft black hair, running his fingertips over the skin ridges on his face.

A king of Asgard was not supposed to feel powerless, or even *be* powerless. If Thor could tear apart the wretched tapestry of fate that led them to this impasse, he would have burned it all to ashes and started anew. If only Loki could be his. If only there was a simple solution. If only they really could stay right here and shut out the rest of the world that had no place for them anyway.

He’d racked his brain so many times to try to find a solution that could please everybody. Thor did not wish to break the heart of his father or his mother in his desire to stay with Loki. The secret could not stay secret forever. Thor could not imagine that Odin or Frigga would take the news lightly. He could not imagine that anything would get better after that point.

Thor wanted, *truly* wanted to marry Loki. He smiled a bit at his own foolishness. It could never happen. He may as well stop thinking of it. He may as well stop dreaming of how he would tell his father that he would refuse a queen and keep Loki at his side instead, that if Loki was to be his advisor then what was the harm in it being just the two of them ruling Asgard together? He may as well stop imagining, over and over, the conversation he would have with his mother about it, envisioning the confusion and disappointment in her eyes.

Suddenly the cavern felt very cold, and Thor could not say why. Gently, he coaxed Loki awake just enough to convince him to let Thor carry him back to the camp. Loki dreamily agreed and hopped willingly onto Thor’s back. Thor covered him with his fur cloak to ensure that nobody would see the blue skin, and then set off on the journey back to their tent. He could come back to retrieve the rest of the furs later.

Arriving back at the camp, he saw that most of the Einherjar had not even returned from the festivities yet. He mentioned to the guards who had stayed behind that he and Loki were exhausted and that they were not to be disturbed, and then entered back into their tent and laid Loki on the bed.

Loki whined, as he usually did, as Thor set about taking off his shoes, but once he settled himself under the blankets he quieted down and fell back to sleep straight away.

Thor climbed in beside him and did nothing but hold Loki close to him for the remainder of the night.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The atmosphere at the next day's conference was lighter and more relaxed than it had ever been. Despite the heavy weight on Thor's heart, it brought a genuine smile to his face to see the Asgardians and Jotnar taking the first steps towards treating each other with something like respect. It seemed that most everybody had enjoyed the festival last night, and the Frost Giants were pleasantly surprised to hear how the Asgardians had loved it.

The meeting that day went well, which lifted Thor's spirits considerably. If nothing else, at least this was going the way it was intended. It would take much more than a single night of frivolity to rebuild the bridge between their realms, but they were already worlds past where they had been yesterday.

Thor kept stealing glances over at Loki, who seemed more engaged in the discussion than he had been before. He even spoke up a few times, which was rare enough to marvel at, but what was more, he was being listened to. It was enough to make Thor want to grab him up and kiss him and tell him how proud he was, but that could wait until later.

The meeting ended earlier than expected, with much more resolved than they'd projected. Jotunheim and Asgard had already agreed to reopen trade, and as it turned out, there was more than enough needed by each realm that the other could provide. It left Thor and Loki both with a renewed sense of accomplishment. As they were getting ready to leave, Thor shot Loki a telling look that said they would be both celebrating appropriately that night.

Just as Thor had clasped on his fur cloak, Hymir tapped him on the shoulder.

"I did not want to mention this before the meeting," he said lowly into Thor's ear, "but the king has requested an audience with you."

Thor froze. "King Laufey?" he asked, suddenly gripped with apprehension. "I...what does he want with me?"

"He heard that you were in the city yesterday, and how you persuaded your Asgardian friends to join the festival. He wishes to, ah...have a word with you about it."

"Is there a problem?" Loki asked, coming up beside the two of them and narrowing his eyes at Hymir.

"There's no problem," Thor assured him. "You go on back with everybody else, I will be back later."

"Where are you going?"

"Evidently King Laufey wants to speak with me."

Loki raised his eyes to the Jotun ambassador and frowned. "Did the king request my presence as well?"

"He did not mention you."

Loki shut his eyes and exhaled softly. “I’ll have you remember that *I* am the future ambassador of Asgard, and *Thor* is here as a guest. If Laufey has something he wishes to communicate, then he may as well get in the habit of communicating it to me as well.”

Hymir only smiled, amusement faint in his eyes. “Well then,” he said. “Who am I to deny the wishes of a prince of Asgard? Come with me.”

Thor smiled briefly at Loki, but Loki only brushed past him, nonchalantly adjusting his cloak as he went.

The three of them plus two Einherjar guards ventured deeper into the castle. The halls they traveled through on their way to Laufey’s throne room were much more open, more brightly lit than the path they took to the conference room. The sky was still as clear as it had been last night, allowing Jotunheim’s weak sun to shine through with full force, illuminating the glassy icicles and frosted walls until they were a blindingly bright white.

They reached Laufey’s throne room and were allowed access by two enormous Jotun guards. Hymir strolled inside with no discernible emotion. From the moment he’d told Thor of his summoning, Thor had not been able to figure out if this was a benevolent meeting, or if he had inadvertently begun the next war.

Jotunheim’s throne room was no less grand than Asgard’s, and in some ways, more imposing. The floor, though sporadically covered with elaborate rugs, was made of ice so clear as to be almost glass, and the walls seemed to be made of mirrors—though Thor supposed it could have just been more ice—making the room appear three times as large as it truly was.

Upon a large dais sat Laufey, King of Jotunheim, looking as though his very body had been carved from ice and stone. He stared down at them as they approached, his eyes unreadable and cold. Thor tried to find any trace of Loki in his features, but there was none. No indication whatsoever that Loki shared any relation with the giant before them.

Hymir knelt before his king once they were an appropriate distance. Thor and the others followed suit, though he noticed Loki did so somewhat begrudgingly.

“I asked for only one of Asgard’s precious princes,” Laufey said, his voice like the hard scraping of stone against stone. “And yet, I see two.”

The party rose to their feet at once, and Thor could see rage and defiance in Loki’s face.

“I am the one who was sent by my father, Odin Borson of Asgard,” Loki said with veiled indignation. “*I* was sent here to broker peace between our realms.”

“Was it then *your* idea to allow your Asgardians to run amok in my city without my leave?” Laufey asked, not at all fazed. “The festivals of Jotunheim are sacred and dignified. I do not need boorish Asgardian drunkards to deface our traditions with their revelry.”

Loki opened his mouth to speak, but Thor held out his arm and stepped forward. “I am the one who encouraged my people to join in the festivities last night. I am truly sorry if they did not show your people’s traditions the respect it deserved.”

Laufey smiled, a curt, crooked grin. “And where did the son of Odin gain such love for the Frost Giants? Do you sing songs in Asgard of how many Jotun infants were slaughtered in the throes of battle? Do you mourn our lost temples, our stolen artifacts, do you have a day of memory for the lives destroyed by your glorious king Odin?”

“We do not, King Laufey,” Thor said, his voice and gaze unwavering. “But I do wish to one by one atone for the sins of my father. I have learned much about your kingdom and your people, and I do not wish for this animosity to keep future generations separated.”

Laufey snorted. “One night of revelry surely did not teach you ‘much’ about anything.” He narrowed his eyes. “Is there some reason you are so invested in peace? What is it you really seek, young prince? There is nothing here for you in Jotunheim. There is nothing here for any of your people.”

Thor paused a moment before answering. “Perhaps you are right. But I have no ulterior motive for wanting our realms to reconcile. ...I know how badly ignorance and willful blindness can damage us, and how deeply the disease can spread.”

“You are nothing but an idealistic, naïve boy of a prince,” Laufey spat. “You know nothing of *disease*, as you so eloquently call it. You know nothing of how irreparably war has damaged my people, and you know *nothing* of my people’s plight!”

“You’re right, I don’t,” Thor replied, once again cutting off Loki as he was about to speak. “I don’t, and I am not satisfied with that. All of this will only spread to my children and your children and so on down our lineages unless we change it *now*. I cannot wait to hope that my son or grandson will be the one to change it. I cannot wait to hope that in the future, the tragedy of what happened to your people will not repeat itself. Your grievance is with Odin, it is not with me. *I* am the one who is admitting his faults, even if he will not.”

Laufey only sat back and laughed. “Words and more words. The true weapons of Asgard, blunt and meaningless.”

“How dare you—” Loki hissed, but Thor placed a hand on Loki’s chest and shook his head. Nevertheless, Loki ignored him.

“You speak as though you would rather go back to war with us,” Loki said bitterly. “Is that what you want!?”

“*Loki*,” Thor said sternly. “He’s not saying that.”

Laufey raised an eyebrow but said nothing, looking down at them with amusement written in his hard features.

“Laufey,” Thor continued, “I can offer you nothing but words and promises now. I am not yet king and I do not have the power my father does. But if there were anything I could offer you to prove to you that I truly desire peace between our realms....”

“For a start,” said Laufey casually, “you could return to me my Casket of Ancient Winters.”

Thor cringed inwardly. “I cannot do that. It is not mine to give.”

Laufey leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. As his body moved, his joints creaked with a sound reminiscent of cracking glaciers. “What *is* yours to give, young prince? I have no interest in brokering deals with those who can offer me nothing.”

“I can offer you my word that—”

“*I do not want your promises!*” Laufey shouted, jumping to his feet, his voice reverberating around the icy hall, the walls and the floor shuddering with the force of his words.

For a moment, the throne room was filled with nothing but silence, Laufey's piercing gaze shooting straight through them.

"I do not want your promises," the Jotun king repeated, his voice softer but no less fierce. "You Asgardians lost nothing as a result of the war. Do you hear me, boy? *Nothing*. My people lost everything. The festival you saw yesterday is but a dim shade of what we used to be. Your petty promises are wasted on me."

Thor looked to the floor, lost deep in thought. For a long while he did not say a word, nor did Loki believe he would continue to speak at all. Just as Laufey was about to dismiss them, Thor raised his eyes again.

"Before I was worthy of wielding Mjolnir, my father told me that it could be two things," Thor said steadily. "A weapon to destroy, or a tool to build. For much of my youth I have truly only seen it as the former. I will help you rebuild your temples and your cities, Laufey. I will give back the spoils that my people stole. I will do my utmost to reopen communication and trade between our two kingdoms so that your people may return to the life that is rightfully theirs."

"We do not need you to be our selfless Aesir savior," Laufey spat bitterly.

"I'm not looking to save you, I'm looking to *help* you," Thor replied, unfazed. "I will come here personally, once a year, to return a portion of what was taken and offer my hammer and my services to rebuild the razed temples."

Laufey grinned humorlessly. "That is a large promise, young prince. Supposing I agree to this idealistic fantasy of yours. What will happen if you do not keep your end of the deal?"

"Then you may exact your rage upon me, and me alone." Thor's voice did not waver, nor did he look away from Laufey's gaze for an instant. "I will be more than happy to meet with you and draw up the terms before we depart."

"And what would your father say in response to this?"

"Nothing that will change my mind."

Laufey sat back down on his throne, taking a deep breath and exhaling softly. He closed his eyes a moment, considering Thor's words. "I do not like idealism," he said at length. "But your bold claims intrigue me. Rarely have I known such blatant audacity to reap rewards, but if this is truly the bed you wish to make, I see no reason why you should not also lie in it."

Loki shot Thor a quick glance. There was no reading what was behind his eyes just then.

Laufey waved a hand. "Go. I must consult with my councilors, and I will send for you."

Thor bowed his head respectfully. "I thank you, King Laufey."

It wasn't until they were back safely in their tent that Thor exhaled deeply and collapsed onto the bed.

"I hope you realize what you've done," Loki said bitterly, ripping off his cloak and letting it thump silently to the floor. "You are so *stupid*! You *never* think anything through!"

Thor sat up and ran his hands down his face, then just looked at Loki without saying a word.

“You all but gave Laufey leave to *kill* you, Thor!” Loki shouted. “What makes you think he won’t do everything he can to exploit what you just said?! Father will never allow this. You’ve done nothing but make Laufey angry.”

“Loki,” Thor said softly.

“I don’t even care what Father says, *I* won’t allow it!” Loki continued, pacing around the tent and throwing up his hands. “You cannot come here alone and expect that Laufey will not try everything he can to make sure that you do not return home! He’ll kill you as a means of declaring war!”

“*Loki*,” Thor repeated, with slightly more force. He reached forward, grabbed Loki’s hands, and smiled. “You have no cause to worry.”

“I have no cause to worry?” Loki said, raising his eyebrows. “Tell me, dear brother, how I have no cause to worry!?”

“Laufey would do no such thing as attempt to kill me. Not if I keep my word. He is not so foolish as to not understand the consequences of such an action.”

“Still, I refuse to let you come here on your own. There is no reason for such a reckless sacrifice. I won’t let you do it, Thor.”

Thor smiled again. He raised himself up just enough to reach Loki’s cheek, where he placed a soft kiss, and then sat down again. “Would you come along with me?”

Loki drew back, shocked, and sputtered, “I—excuse me? You want me to come here and toil away with you in this wasteland like some common mason? *I beg* your pardon!”

“No,” Thor laughed. “I wouldn’t dream of it. I will do the toiling. But I will need your council. I will need you to use your words where I cannot. You can continue the peace negotiations with Jotunheim and tell me what they need.”

Loki was silent a moment. He stared down where Thor’s hands were gripping his. He swallowed tightly, took a breath, and asked, “Why are you going to so much trouble? Why does this place matter to you so much?”

Thor raised Loki’s hand to his mouth and kissed his fingers. His lips were soft and warm, and his thumb moved gently across Loki’s fingernails before he pulled away. “You know why.”

Loki sighed and pulled his hands out of Thor’s grasp. He sat down beside him on the bed and was instantly pulled into a tight side-hug. He rested his head on Thor’s shoulder and exhaled wearily.

“I also thought,” Thor continued, resting his head atop Loki’s, “that while we are here, we will need a place to stay. Laufey is unlikely to share any guest chambers with us, so I will have to build one for us. ...I was thinking of asking Laufey’s leave to build a place for us by our spring.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Nothing fancy; I have never built a house before.”

Loki snorted. *Of course he has never built a house. Why else would he want to do it?*

“But,” Thor continued, placing his hand atop Loki’s, “I will build one for you. For us.” He paused, as if afraid to go on. “And when we come here, it can be just the two of us. I’ll, um...I’ll ask

Mother and Father to delay any sort of...discussions about finding a wife for me until our work here is done. That should give us time to figure out...you know. Us.”

“What about ‘us’?” Loki asked, frowning. “Mother and Father will see you married, Thor, no matter how long you wish to delay it.”

“I will *not* marry,” Thor said defiantly. “I will not. Unless it is to you. I will find a way to say that to Mother, and I will find a way to make Father understand.”

“That’s very kind and noble of you, Brother.”

“I mean it, though.” Thor lifted his head and turned to face Loki. He took hold of Loki’s face and gently turned it towards him. “We do not have to come up with an answer now. Or even in a year. I just...I don’t know what is the correct answer, or what is the right way. All I know is that I want to be beside you. And that I cannot go back to how things used to be, only seeing you a few hours out of the day, only being able to touch you once a month. I cannot do it.”

Loki smirked but felt genuinely flattered. “And so you propose to whisk me away to Jotunheim once a year?”

“Yes,” Thor said, brushing a bit of hair behind Loki’s ear. “I do not know how long our trips will last, but it will be better than only getting to be with you once a month. It will be better than hiding.” He grinned widely. “We’ll be alone. We’ll be safe.”

“We’ll be sharing a room again,” Loki added with a grimace.

Thor laughed at that, a hearty, genuine laugh that Loki had not heard in some time. “Yes!” he replied. “Yes, we will share a room, but I promise I will keep it tidy for you, Loki.” He pulled Loki into a hug and then pressed a kiss to his lips.

Loki couldn’t help but smile. For an instant he let himself visualize it: just him and Thor, in a place by the spring, where they could have each other all to themselves. He felt an odd but pleasant warmth fill him up at the thought, and he wanted it more fiercely than he had ever wanted anything.

“Very well,” he said quietly, sighing. “I have never been able to stop you once your mind is set on something.”

Thor’s smile only got bigger, and he kissed Loki again, a deep, lingering gesture.

“But lest you forget,” Loki said as they broke away, “I am not the only one you must convince.”

“I know.” Thor’s smile had not diminished in the slightest.

“You must persuade Laufey. You must convince Father. And all the ambassadors.”

“I know, I know!”

“And Mother.”

“I will do it.”

Loki smiled, overcome by the look in Thor’s eyes. He leaned forward and pulled Thor into a tight hug, and then simply stayed there, not loosening his grip for a long while. Thor tolerated it, and Loki could feel his brother’s heart beating against his own chest.

“...Thank you,” Loki said after a long silence. He could not look Thor in the eye as he said this. “Thank you for everything.” *Thank you for doing all of this...thank you for everything you have given me. I don’t deserve an ounce of it. I don’t deserve you.*

“You don’t have to thank me,” Thor replied, rubbing his hands up and down Loki’s back. “I love you.”

Loki smiled and pressed a kiss into the crook of Thor’s neck. In that moment, he had no doubt.

Laufey sent for Thor later that night. Loki did not sleep for hours as he awaited Thor’s return, as the king had only requested Thor’s presence. His brother had gone with his fair share of Einherjar guards, but nevertheless Loki could not help but fret. He half-expected that Thor would never return, that Laufey was a liar and would use this moment to ambush and kill all of them.

But no such thing happened. Loki had sat up reading—or reading what little he could retain in his anxiousness—and countless hours after Thor’s departure, he returned to the tent.

“About time!” Loki shouted, throwing the book just to the right of Thor’s head. “Did you give any thought to *me* while you were gone!? I thought you would never come back!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Thor laughed, walking over and kissing Loki on the cheek. Loki crossed his arms and pouted.

“Well?” Loki demanded. “What happened?”

“Father is coming here tomorrow,” Thor said, removing his cloak and his boots.

Loki’s eyes widened. “Father is?”

“Yes. I spoke with Laufey about the plan we discussed earlier—leaving out some of the details, as you can guess.” Thor winked at his little brother with a grin. “It took some time to persuade him that I was genuine in my desire to help. He made me explain over and over what it was I meant to do here. I think he may have been trying to see if I would change my story, or become less resolute, but I would explain it a thousand times if it would make him see.”

“So then what?” Loki asked, watching Thor intently as he undressed further.

“We made some preliminary agreements, but Laufey refused to do anything until he spoke with Father. And so I sent one of the Einherjar home to bring him the news and request his presence. Tomorrow it shall be discussed at the usual meeting.”

Loki sighed, staring down at his lap. “Hmm,” he said noncommittally. “And do you think Father will go for this plan of yours?”

“I can only hope that he will.” Now dressed in his sleeping clothes, Thor lifted up the blanket and slid in beside Loki. Loki nestled up next to him and laid his head on Thor’s shoulder.

“If he does not,” Loki said, his tension beginning to dissipate as he settled against Thor’s heartbeat, “then promise me you and I will run.”

“Loki...” Thor sighed wearily.

“No, I want you to promise.” Loki lifted himself up on his elbow and looked Thor in the eye. “You

promised me a house by the spring and I want the stupid house, all right?"

Thor laughed softly. "All right," he said.

"I mean it. And I want a library in it too."

"For *what*?"

"You saw how many books I bought in the city the other day. I will need space for them."

Thor sighed but his smile stayed. "Anything else?"

Loki laid back down on Thor's shoulder and huffed. "I'll think of something."

"I know you will." Thor kissed his head.

The next morning's council meeting went miraculously well. Tensions in the room were high as both Laufey and Odin were present, the two kings having not met since centuries ago on the battlefield. However, it seemed that whatever Thor had said to Laufey yesterday left the Jotun king in relatively decent spirits.

Thor explained again, calmly and carefully, his plan to devote a portion of time every year coming to Jotunheim and personally helping to rebuild the destroyed areas. He would also ensure that peace talks stayed up-to-date between the two kingdoms by bringing Loki and the ambassadors with him. Thor would also spend time with the Jotun civilians in any way he could, listening to their needs, doing what he could to help restore the realm to what it had once been.

Throughout the explanation, Loki could not help but notice how Odin and Laufey's eyes were locked onto one another the entire time. He felt as though if somebody were to merely shift in their seat, it would cause the next war right here in this room.

"What of your duties at home?" Odin asked once Thor was finished. "What of your *own* realm?"

"I will still be at home, Father," Thor replied. "For most of the time, in fact. I only ask one month out of the year to devote to mending this wound."

"For how long do you wish to keep my firstborn son in servitude?" Odin said to Laufey.

Laufey only grinned. "All this came from the mind of your own boy. He is quite willing to make the sacrifice."

"How long, Laufey?"

"Until his work is done, I suppose."

Odin grumbled and sat back in his seat.

"Father," Thor said. "I am willing to do this. Please."

"I will review the terms you have drawn up with my private councilors," Odin said, not looking Thor in the eye. "I will discuss it with your mother as well. That is all I will promise for now."

The Asgardians remained in Jotunheim for only another week. Odin left for Asgard directly after the meeting with Laufey and did not return before they were set to leave. Thor did not expect to receive a definitive answer until their tour of the realms was over, and they had returned home to Asgard. The uneasiness of not knowing stayed with him for the remainder of their time away, and he did not get a good night's sleep for weeks.

Nevertheless, he tried to remain positive. At night, he laid with Loki in their tent and they talked about the spring and the house that Thor would build. Loki vehemently denied that he would help with the actual construction whatsoever, but Thor knew that he would, in his own way.

There was something in Loki that Thor had never seen before. "Happy" seemed too simplistic and "content" was not it. After days of watching him, seeing how easily the smiles came to his face now, how readily he accepted Thor's kisses and adoration, how eager he too was to return to Jotunheim, Thor knew what it was.

Peace. Stillness. His brother was *calm*. For the first time in Thor's memory, the chaos that seemed to always be present within Loki was gone. It was a part of him, for certain, but Thor had never known him to be *hopeful*. He was looking forward to the future, *his* future that he and Thor would share together.

When they finally did return to Asgard, they were greeted with a massive feast to welcome them back home. Loki stayed as long as was proper, but then retreated back to his room after a certain point in the night. Or at least, that was where Thor assumed he'd gone. After Thor had eaten his fill and was stumbling more than walking back to his room, he found Loki there, waiting for him.

It had been a memorable night.

When the day finally came for Odin and Frigga to announce their decision, Thor felt like he was going to be sick. What if the answer was no? He would not be able to face Loki—much less anyone else—if this plan was denied.

But somehow, miraculously, Thor got the answer he wanted.

"Your mother and I discussed it at length," Odin said. The four of them, Loki and Frigga included, were in Odin's study when the All-Father gave Thor the news. "If this is what you want, and if you are willing to truly put in as much work as you have promised Laufey, then I see no reason why you should not do as you wish."

Thor's eyes widened. He gripped the arms of his chair and shot a bewildered look to his mother. Frigga only smiled, and Thor smiled back, knowing that she had supported him from the start. Thor looked over to Loki, whose face was unreadable, but underneath it Thor knew his heart was leaping.

"I do want it, Father," Thor said, nodding. "I want to make you proud, and do everything that you have taught me to do, as a good king of Asgard."

Odin smiled, and he did not appear as old as he normally did in that moment. "I am already proud of you, my son. I know that Asgard is in the best of care when I finally pass the throne on to you."

Frigga looked to Loki and asked, "How do *you* feel about all this, Loki? Going off to Jotunheim with your brother once a year?"

Loki leaned back in his chair and huffed. "It will be miserable. If being cooped up with him for a month is my sacrifice to the realm, then it is a cruel sacrifice indeed."

Thor shared a glance with his brother and had never been more grateful for Loki's skill at lying.

It was many months until their house was built. Thor studied tirelessly and Loki assisted him in drawing up the plans. They continued to take their day together by the river, where Thor would practice woodworking and masonry while Loki gave his commentary, needed or otherwise.

Loki's heat cycle came again, only a few months after they returned from their trip across the realms. Once again, Thor stayed with him in his room for the entire week. Loki refused to let Thor lay with him—though Thor's pleading was quite regular—as he feared the mindboggling possibility that he could very well get pregnant from such a thing.

The look on Thor's face when Loki had told him that was a sight to behold.

Thor and some other masonry workers made regular trips to Jotunheim to begin construction of their home. Somewhat to Thor's surprise, Laufey had agreed to let him build in the spring cavern. If it was not in his city, and if he did not have to see it, Laufey had said he hardly cared where Thor and Loki stayed. Thor returned home to Loki with stories of what their house looked like, and assured him repeatedly that yes, he would remember to put in a library.

They stayed hidden. It was torture, but Thor knew it would pay off. Save for their single day together, there was no telling when they might see each other, or steal a kiss, or touch. If anything, it only motivated Thor to build faster.

It was the day of their river date. Instead of going there, Thor took Loki over the Bifrost and into Jotunheim, back into the spring's cavern where they had first made love.

"Having me close my eyes is so silly," Loki grumbled, tugging at the blindfold as Thor led him over the rocks. "I *know* what the surprise is."

"True, but it is your first time seeing it!" Thor replied.

They emerged out into the cavern. Thor positioned Loki before the threshold of their new house.

"Can I see it already?" Loki asked impatiently.

"Yes, you may." Thor swiftly removed the blindfold and Loki blinked, then gasped lightly, taking in the sight of their new home.

It was small, but bigger than Loki had imagined. From the outside, it appeared to have only one main floor and a loft, as evidenced by the circular glass window nestled just under the angle of the roof. Thor had taken the time to put a few flower beds underneath the lower floor's windows, filling them with Loki's favorite flowers of Jotunheim. Smoke was wafting out of a tiny brick chimney, which jutted out from the red-shingled roof.

Thor had drawn pictures for Loki before, but it still had not prepared him for seeing the real thing. For finally seeing proof that this was real. This was *their* house. Their place. The place that nobody else knew about or cared about, the place he'd dreamed about and never believed he would ever get. The place where they didn't need to hide.

"What do you say we have a housewarming celebration?" Thor asked, wrapping his arms around Loki from behind.

“Oh, very well. But you must carry me inside.”

Loki had barely finished his sentence before Thor swept him up into his arms and kissed him. Thor carried him inside, through the door of their new home. Loki knew this was only a temporary arrangement, and that they could not truly stay here together forever. But for now they could. For now they could pretend that none of this would change. Perhaps someday in the future it would not. But for the moment, it was more than good enough.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I sincerely hope you have enjoyed <3

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